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ROMOLA.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BALDASSARRE MAKES AN ACQUAINTANCE.

When Baldassarre was wandering about Florence in search of a spare outhouse where he might have the cheapest of sheltered beds, his steps had been attracted towards that sole portion of ground within the walls of the city which is not perfectly level, and where the spectator, lifted above the roofs of the houses, can see beyond the city to the protecting hills and far-stretching valley, otherwise shut out from his view except along the welcome opening made by the course of the Arno. Part of that ground has been already seen by us as the hill of Bogoli, at that time a great stone-quarry; but the side towards which Baldassarre directed his steps was the one that sloped down behind the Via de' Bardi, and was most commonly called the hill of San Giorgio. Bratti had told him that Tito's dwelling

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was in the Via de' Bardi; and, after surveying that street, he turned up the slope of the hill which he had observed as he was crossing the bridge. If he could find a sheltering outhouse on that hill, he would be glad: he had now for some years been accustomed to live with a broad sky about him; and, moreover, the narrow passes of the streets, with their strip of sky above, and the unknown labyrinth around them, seemed to intensify his sense of loneliness and feeble memory.

The hill was sparsely inhabited, and covered chiefly by gardens; but in one spot was a piece of rough ground jagged with great stones, which had never been cultivated since a landslip had ruined some houses there towards the end of the thirteenth century. Just above the edge of this broken ground stood a queer little square building, looking like a truncated tower roofed in with fluted tiles, and close by was a small outhouse, apparently built up against a piece of ruined stone wall. Under a large half-dead mulberry-tree that was now sending its last fluttering leaves in at the open doorways, a shrivelled, hardy old woman was untying a goat with two kids, and Baldassarre could see that part of the outbuilding was occupied by live stock; but the door of the other part was open, and it was empty of everything but some tools and straw. It was just the sort of place he wanted. He spoke to the old woman; but it was not till he got close to her and shouted in her ear, that he succeeded in making her understand his want of a lodging, and his readiness to pay for it. At first he could get no

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answer beyond shakes of the head and the words, "No—no lodging," uttered in the muffled tone of the deaf. But, by dint of persistence, he made clear to her that he was a poor stranger from a long way over seas, and could not afford to go to hostelries; that he only wanted to lie on the straw in the outhouse, and would pay her a quattrino or two a-week for that shelter. She still looked at him dubiously, shaking her head and talking low to herself; but presently, as if a new thought occurred to her, she fetched a hatchet from the house, and, showing him a chump that lay half covered with litter in a corner, asked him if he would chop that up for her: if he would, he might lie in the outhouse for one night. He agreed, and Monna Lisa stood with her arms akimbo to watch him, with a smile of gratified cunning, saying low to herself—

"It's lain there ever since my old man died. What then? I might as well have put a stone on the fire. He chops very well, though he does speak with a foreign tongue, and looks odd. I couldn't have got it done cheaper. And if he only wants a bit of straw to lie on, I might make him do an errand or two up and down the hill. Who need know? And sin that's hidden's half forgiven.[1] He's a stranger: he'll take no notice of *her*. And I'll tell her to keep her tongue still."

The antecedent to these feminine pronouns had a pair of blue eyes, which at that moment were applied to a large round hole in the shutter of the upper window. The shutter was closed, not for

[1] "Peccato celato è mezzo perdonato."

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any penal reasons, but because only the opposite window had the luxury of glass in it: the weather was not warm, and a round hole four inches in diameter served all the purposes of observation. The hole was, unfortunately, a little too high, and obliged the small observer to stand on a low stool of a rickety character; but Tessa would have stood a long while in a much more inconvenient position for the sake of seeing a little variety in her life. She had been drawn to the opening at the first loud tones of the strange voice speaking to Monna Lisa; and darting gently across her room every now and then to peep at something, she continued to stand there until the wood had been chopped, and she saw Baldassarre enter the outhouse, as the dusk was gathering, and seat himself on the straw.

A great temptation had laid hold of Tessa's mind; she would go and take that old man part of her supper, and talk to him a little. He was not deaf like Monna Lisa, and besides she could say a great many things to him that it was no use to shout at Monna Lisa, who knew them already. And he was a stranger—strangers came from a long way off and went away again, and lived nowhere in particular. It was naughty, she knew, for obedience made the largest part in Tessa's idea of duty; but it would be something to confess to the Padre next Pasqua, and there was nothing else to confess except going to sleep sometimes over her beads, and being a little cross with Monna Lisa because she was so deaf; for she had as much idleness as she liked now, and was never frightened into telling white lies. She turned

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away from her shutter with rather an excited expression in her childish face, which was as pretty and pouting as ever. Her garb was still that of a simple contadina, but of a contadina prepared for a festa: her gown of dark-green serge, with its red girdle, was very clean and neat; she had the string of red glass beads round her neck; and her brown hair, rough from curliness, was duly knotted up, and fastened with the silver pin. She had but one new ornament, and she was very proud of it, for it was a fine gold ring.

Tessa sat on the low stool, nursing her knees, for a minute or two, with her little soul poised in fluttering excitement on the edge of this pleasant transgression. It was quite irresistible. She had been commanded to make no acquaintances, and warned that if she did, all her new happy lot would vanish away, and be like a hidden treasure that turned to lead as soon as it was brought to the daylight; and she had been so obedient that when she had to go to church she had kept her face shaded by her hood and had pursed up her lips quite tightly. It was true her obedience had been a little helped by her own dread lest the alarming stepfather Nofri should turn up even in this quarter, so far from the Por' del Prato, and beat her at least, if he did not drag her back to work for him. But this old man was not an acquaintance; he was a poor stranger going to sleep in the outhouse, and he probably knew nothing of stepfather Nofri; and, besides, if she took him some supper, he would like her, and not want to tell anything about her. Monna Lisa would say she must

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not go and talk to him, therefore Monna Lisa must not be consulted. It did not signify what she found out after it had been done.

Supper was being prepared, she knew—a mountain of macaroni flavoured with cheese, fragrant enough to tame any stranger. So she tripped down-stairs with a mind full of deep designs, and first asking with an innocent look what that noise of talking had been, without waiting for an answer, knit her brow with a peremptory air, something like a kitten trying to be formidable, and sent the old woman upstairs; saying, she chose to eat her supper down below. In three minutes Tessa with her lantern in one hand and a wooden bowl of macaroni in the other, was kicking gently at the door of the outhouse; and Baldassarre, roused from sad reverie, doubted in the first moment whether he were awake as he opened the door and saw this surprising little handmaid, with delight in her wide eyes, breaking in on his dismal loneliness.

"I've brought you some supper," she said, lifting her mouth towards his ear and shouting, as if he had been deaf like Monna Lisa. "Sit down and eat it, while I stay with you."

Surprise and distrust surmounted every other feeling in Baldassarre, but though he had no smile or word of gratitude ready, there could not be any impulse to push away this visitant, and he sank down passively on his straw again, while Tessa placed herself close to him, put the wooden bowl on his lap, and set down the lantern in front of them, crossing her hands before her, and nodding

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at the bowl with a significant smile, as much as to say, "Yes, you may really eat it." For, in the excitement of carrying out her deed, she had forgotten her previous thought that the stranger would not be deaf, and had fallen into her habitual alternative of dumb show and shouting.

The invitation was not a disagreeable one, for he had been gnawing a remnant of dry bread, which had left plenty of appetite for anything warm and relishing. Tessa watched the disappearance of two or three mouthfuls without speaking, for she had thought his eyes rather fierce at first; but now she ventured to put her mouth to his ear again and cry—

"I like my supper, don't you?"

It was not a smile, but rather the milder look of a dog touched by kindness, but unable to smile, that Baldassarre turned on this round blue-eyed thing that was caring about him.

"Yes," he said; "but I can hear well—I'm not deaf."

"It is true; I forgot," said Tessa, lifting her hands and clasping them. "But Monna Lisa is deaf, and I live with her. She's a kind old woman, and I'm not frightened at her. And we live very well: we have plenty of nice things. I can have nuts if I like. And I'm not obliged to work now. I used to have to work, and I didn't like it; but I liked feeding the mules, and I should like to see poor Giannetta, the little mule, again. We've only got a goat and two kids, and I used to talk to the goat a good deal, because there was nobody else but Monna Lisa.

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But now I've got something else—can you guess what it is?"

She drew her head back, and looked with a challenging smile at Baldassarre, as if she had proposed a difficult riddle to him.

"No," said he, putting aside his bowl, and looking at her dreamily. It seemed as if this young prattling thing were some memory come back out of his own youth.

"You like me to talk to you, don't you?" said Tessa, "but you must not tell anybody. Shall I fetch you a bit of cold sausage?"

He shook his head, but he looked so mild now that Tessa felt quite at her ease.

"Well, then, I've got a little baby. Such a pretty bambinetto, with little fingers and nails! Not old yet; it was born at the Natività, Monna Lisa says. I was married one Natività, a long, long while ago, and nobody knew. O Santa Madonna! I didn't mean to tell you that!"

Tessa set up her shoulders and bit her lip, looking at Baldassarre as if this betrayal of secrets must have an exciting effect on him too. But he seemed not to care much; and perhaps that was in the nature of strangers.

"Yes," she said, carrying on her thought aloud, "you are a stranger; you don't live anywhere or know anybody, do you?"

"No," said Baldassarre, also thinking aloud, rather than consciously answering, "I only know one man."

"His name is not Nofri, is it?" said Tessa, anxiously.

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"No," said Baldassarre, noticing her look of fear. "Is that your husband's name?"

That mistaken supposition was very amusing to Tessa. She laughed and clapped her hands as she said—

"No, indeed! But I must not tell you anything about my husband. You would never think what he is—not at all like Nofri!"

She laughed again at the delightful incongruity between the name of Nofri—which was not separable from the idea of the cross-grained stepfather—and the idea of her husband.

"But I don't see him very often," she went on, more gravely. "And sometimes I pray to the Holy Madonna to send him oftener, and once she did. But I must go back to my bimbo now. I'll bring it to show you to-morrow. You would like to see it. Sometimes it cries and makes a face, but only when it's hungry, Monna Lisa says. You wouldn't think it, but Monna Lisa had babies once, and they are all dead old men. My husband says she will never die now, because she's so well dried. I'm glad of that, for I'm fond of her. You would like to stay here to-morrow, shouldn't you?"

"I should like to have this place to come and rest in, that's all," said Baldassarre. "I would pay for it, and harm nobody."

"No, indeed; I think you are not a bad old man. But you look sorry about something. Tell me, is there anything you shall cry about when I leave you by yourself? *I* used to cry once."

"No, child; I think I shall cry no more."

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"That's right; and I'll bring you some breakfast, and show you the bimbo. Good-night."

Tessa took up her bowl and lantern, and closed the door behind her. The pretty loving apparition had been no more to Baldassarre than a faint rainbow on the blackness to the man who is wrestling in deep waters. He hardly thought of her again till his dreamy waking passed into the more vivid images of disturbed sleep.

But Tessa thought much of him. She had no sooner entered the house than she told Monna Lisa what she had done, and insisted that the stranger should be allowed to come and rest in the outhouse when he liked. The old woman, who had had her notions of making him a useful tenant, made a great show of reluctance, shook her head, and urged that Messer Naldo would be angry if she let any one come about the house. Tessa did not believe that. Naldo had said nothing against strangers who lived nowhere; and this old man knew nobody except one person, who was not Nofri.

"Well," conceded Monna Lisa, at last, "if I let him stay for a while and carry things up the hill for me, thou must keep thy counsel and tell nobody."

"No," said Tessa, "I'll only tell the bimbo."

"And then," Monna Lisa went on, in her thick undertone, "God may love us well enough not to let Messer Naldo find out anything about it. For he never comes here but at dark; and as he was here two days ago, it's likely he'll never come at all till the old man's gone away again."

"Oh me! Monna," said Tessa, clasping her hands,

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"I wish Naldo had not to go such a long, long way sometimes before he comes back again."

"Ah, child! the world's big, they say. There are places behind the mountains, and if people go night and day, night and day, they get to Rome, and see the Holy Father."

Tessa looked submissive in the presence of this mystery, and began to rock her baby, and sing syllables of vague loving meaning, in tones that imitated a triple chime.

The next morning she was unusually industrious in the prospect of more dialogue, and of the pleasure she should give the poor old stranger by showing him her baby. But before she could get ready to take Baldassarre his breakfast, she found that Monna Lisa had been employing him as a drawer of water. She deferred her paternosters, and hurried down to insist that Baldassarre should sit on his straw, so that she might come and sit by him again while he ate his breakfast. That attitude made the new companionship all the more delightful to Tessa, for she had been used to sitting on straw in old days along with her goats and mules.

"I will not let Monna Lisa give you too much work to do," she said, bringing him some steaming broth and soft bread. "I don't like much work, and I daresay you don't. I like sitting in the sunshine and feeding things. Monna Lisa says, work is good, but she does it all herself, so I don't mind. She's not a cross old woman; you needn't be afraid of her being cross. And now, you eat that, and I'll go and fetch my baby and show it you."

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Presently she came back with the small mummy-case in her arms. The mummy looked very lively, having unusually large dark eyes, though no more than the usual indication of a future nose.

"This is my baby," said Tessa, seating herself close to Baldassarre. "You didn't think it was so pretty, did you? It is like the little Gesù, and I should think the Santa Madonna would be kinder to me now, is it not true? But I have not much to ask for, because I have everything now—only that I should see my husband oftener. You may hold the bambino a little if you like, but I think you must not kiss him, because you might hurt him."

She spoke this prohibition in a tone of soothing excuse, and Baldassarre could not refuse to hold the small package. "Poor thing! poor thing!" he said, in a deep voice which had something strangely threatening in its apparent pity. It did not seem to him as if this guileless loving little woman could reconcile him to the world at all, but rather that she was with him against the world, that she was a creature who would need to be avenged.

"Oh, don't you be sorry for me," she said; "for though I don't see him often, he is more beautiful and good than anybody else in the world. I say prayers to him when he's away. You couldn't think what he is!"

She looked at Baldassarre with a wide glance of mysterious meaning, taking the baby from him again, and almost wishing he would question her as if he wanted very much to know more.

"Yes, I could," said Baldassarre, rather bitterly.

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"No, I'm sure you never could," said Tessa, earnestly. "You thought he might be Nofri," she added, with a triumphant air of conclusiveness. "But never mind; you couldn't know. What is your name?"

He rubbed his hand over his knitted brow, then looked at her blankly and said, "Ah, child, what is it?"

It was not that he did not often remember his name well enough; and if he had had presence of mind now to remember it, he would have chosen not to tell it. But a sudden question appealing to his memory, had a paralysing effect, and in that moment he was conscious of nothing but helplessness.

Ignorant as Tessa was, the pity stirred in her by his blank look taught her to say—

"Never mind: you are a stranger, it is no matter about your having a name. Good-bye now, because I want my breakfast. You will come here and rest when you like; Monna Lisa says you may. And don't you be unhappy, for we'll be good to you."

"Poor thing!" said Baldassarre again.

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

NO PLACE FOR REPENTANCE.

MESSER NALDO came again sooner than was expected: he came on the evening of the twenty-eighth of November, only eleven days after his previous visit, proving that he had not gone far beyond the mountains; and a scene which we have witnessed as it took place that evening in the Via de' Bardi may help to explain the impulse which turned his steps towards the hill of San Giorgio.

When Tito had first found this home for Tessa, on his return from Rome, more than a year and a half ago, he had acted, he persuaded himself, simply under the constraint imposed on him by his own kindliness after the unlucky incident which had made foolish little Tessa imagine him to be her husband. It was true that the kindness was manifested towards a pretty trusting thing whom it was impossible to be near without feeling inclined to caress and pet her; but it was not less true that Tito had movements of kindness towards her apart from any contemplated gain to himself. Otherwise,

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charming as her prettiness and prattle were in a lazy moment, he might have preferred to be free from her; for he was not in love with Tessa—he was in love for the first time in his life with an entirely different woman, whom he was not simply inclined to shower caresses on, but whose presence possessed him so that the simple sweep of her long tresses across his cheek seemed to vibrate through the hours. All the young ideal passion he had in him had been stirred by Romola, and his fibre was too fine, his intellect too bright, for him to be tempted into the habits of a gross pleasure-seeker. But he had spun a web about himself and Tessa, which he felt incapable of breaking: in the first moments after the mimic marriage he had been prompted to leave her under an illusion by a distinct calculation of his own possible need, but since that critical moment it seemed to him that the web had gone on spinning itself in spite of him, like a growth over which he had no power. The elements of kindness and self-indulgence are hard to distinguish in a soft nature like Tito's; and the annoyance he had felt under Tessa's pursuit of him on the day of his betrothal, the thorough intention of revealing the truth to her with which he set out to fulfil his promise of seeing her again, were a sufficiently strong argument to him that in ultimately leaving Tessa under her illusion and providing a home for her, he had been overcome by his own kindness. And in these days of his first devotion to Romola he needed a self-justifying argument. He had learned to be glad that she was deceived about

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some things. But every strong feeling makes to itself a conscience of its own—has its own piety; just as much as the feeling of the son towards the mother, which will sometimes survive amid the worst fumes of depravation; and Tito could not yet be easy in committing a secret offence against his wedded love.

But he was all the more careful in taking precautions to preserve the secrecy of the offence. Monna Lisa, who, like many of her class, never left her habitation except to go to one or two particular shops, and to confession once a-year, knew nothing of his real name and whereabout: she only knew that he paid her so as to make her very comfortable, and minded little about the rest, save that she got fond of Tessa, and found pleasure in the cares for which she was paid. There was some mystery behind, clearly, since Tessa was a contadina, and Messer Naldo was a signor; but, for aught Monna Lisa knew, he might be a real husband. For Tito had thoroughly frightened Tessa into silence about the circumstances of their marriage, by telling her that if she broke that silence she would never see him again; and Monna Lisa's deafness, which made it impossible to say anything to her without some premeditation, had saved Tessa from any incautious revelation to her, such as had run off her tongue in talking with Baldassarre. For a long while Tito's visits were so rare, that it seemed likely enough he took journeys between them. They were prompted chiefly by the desire to see that all things were going on well with Tessa; and though

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he always found his visit pleasanter than the prospect of it — always felt anew the charm of that pretty ignorant lovingness and trust—he had not yet any real need of it. But he was determined, if possible, to preserve the simplicity on which the charm depended; to keep Tessa a genuine contadina, and not place the small field-flower among conditions that would rob it of its grace. He would have been shocked to see her in the dress of any other rank than her own; the piquancy of her talk would be all gone, if things began to have new relations for her, if her world became wider, her pleasures less childish; and the squirrel-like enjoyment of nuts at discretion marked the standard of the luxuries he had provided for her. By this means, Tito saved Tessa's charm from being sullied; and he also, by a convenient coincidence, saved himself from aggravating expenses that were already rather importunate to a man whose money was all required for his avowed habits of life.

This, in brief, had been the history of Tito's relation to Tessa up to a very recent date. It is true that once or twice before Bardo's death, the sense that there was Tessa up the hill, with whom it was possible to pass an hour agreeably, had been an inducement to him to escape from a little weariness of the old man, when, for lack of any positive engagement, he might otherwise have borne the weariness patiently and shared Romola's burden. But the moment when he had first felt a real hunger for Tessa's ignorant lovingness and belief in him had not come till quite lately, and it was distinctly

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marked out by circumstances as little to be forgotten as the oncoming of a malady that has permanently vitiated the sight and hearing. It was the day when he had first seen Baldassarre, and had bought the armour. Returning across the bridge that night, with the coat of mail in his hands, he had felt an unconquerable shrinking from an immediate encounter with Romola. She, too, knew little of the actual world; she, too, trusted him; but he had an uneasy consciousness that behind her frank eyes there was a nature that could judge him, and that any ill-founded trust of hers sprang not from pretty brute-like incapacity, but from a nobleness which might prove an alarming touchstone. He wanted a little ease, a little repose from self-control, after the agitation and exertions of the day; he wanted to be where he could adjust his mind to the morrow, without caring how he behaved at the present moment. And there was a sweet adoring creature within reach whose presence was as safe and unconstraining as that of her own kids,—who would believe any fable, and remain quite unimpressed by public opinion. And so on that evening, when Romola was waiting and listening for him, he turned his steps up the hill.

No wonder, then, that the steps took the same course on this evening, eleven days later, when he had had to recoil under Romola's first outburst of scorn. He could not wish Tessa in his wife's place, or refrain from wishing that his wife should be thoroughly reconciled to him; for it was Romola, and not Tessa, that belonged to the world where all

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the larger desires of a man who had ambition and effective faculties must necessarily lie. But he wanted a refuge from a standard disagreeably rigorous, of which he could not make himself independent simply by thinking it folly; and Tessa's little soul was that inviting refuge.

It was not much more than eight o'clock when he went up the stone steps to the door of Tessa's room. Usually she heard his entrance into the house, and ran to meet him, but not to-night; and when he opened the door he saw the reason. A single dim light was burning above the dying fire, and showed Tessa in a kneeling attitude by the head of the bed where the baby lay. Her head had fallen aside on the pillow, and her brown rosary, which usually hung above the pillow over the picture of the Madonna and the golden palm-branches, lay in the loose grasp of her right hand. She had gone fast asleep over her beads. Tito stepped lightly across the little room, and sat down close to her. She had probably heard the opening of the door as part of her dream, for he had not been looking at her two moments before she opened her eyes. She opened them without any start, and remained quite motionless looking at him, as if the sense that he was there smiling at her shut out any impulse which could disturb that happy passiveness. But when he put his hand under her chin, and stooped to kiss her, she said—

"I dreamed it, and then I said it was dreaming—and then I awoke, and it was true."

"Little sinner!" said Tito, pinching her chin,

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"you have not said half your prayers. I will punish you by not looking at your baby; it is ugly."

Tessa did not like those words, even though Tito was smiling. She had some pouting distress in her face, as she said, bending anxiously over the baby—

"Ah, it is not true! He is prettier than anything. You do not think he is ugly. You will look at him. He is even prettier than when you saw him before—only he's asleep, and you can't see his eyes or his tongue, and I can't show you his hair—and it grows—isn't that wonderful? Look at him! It's true his face is very much all alike when he's asleep, there is not so much to see as when he's awake. If you kiss him very gently, he won't wake: you want to kiss him, is it not true?"

He satisfied her by giving the small mummy a butterfly kiss, and then putting his hand on her shoulder and turning her face towards him, said, "You like looking at the baby better than looking at your husband, you false one!"

She was still kneeling, and now rested her hands on his knee, looking up at him like one of Fra Lippo Lippi's round-cheeked adoring angels.

"No," she said, shaking her head; "I love you always best, only I want you to look at the bambino and love him; I used only to want you to love me."

"And did you expect me to come again so soon?" said Tito, inclined to make her prattle. He still felt the effects of the agitation he had undergone—still felt like a man who has been violently jarred; and this was the easiest relief from silence and solitude.

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"Ah, no," said Tessa, "I have counted the days—to-day I began at my right thumb again—since you put on the beautiful chain-coat, that Messer San Michele gave you to take care of you on your journey. And you have got it on now," she said, peeping through the opening in the breast of his tunic. "Perhaps it made you come back sooner."

"Perhaps it did, Tessa," he said. "But don't mind the coat now. Tell me what has happened since I was here. Did you see the tents in the Prato, and the soldiers and horsemen when they passed the bridges—did you hear the drums and trumpets?"

"Yes, and I was rather frightened, because I thought the soldiers might come up here. And Monna Lisa was a little afraid too, for she said they might carry our kids off; she said it was their business to do mischief. But the Holy Madonna took care of us, for we never saw one of them up here. But something has happened, only I hardly dare tell you, and that is what I was saying more Aves for."

"What do you mean, Tessa?" said Tito, rather anxiously. "Make haste and tell me."

"Yes, but will you let me sit on your knee? because then I think I shall not be so frightened."

He took her on his knee, and put his arm round her, but looked grave: it seemed that something unpleasant must pursue him even here.

"At first I didn't mean to tell you," said Tessa, speaking almost in a whisper, as if that would mitigate the offence; "because we thought the old man

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would be gone away before you came again, and it would be as if it had not been. But now he is there, and you are come, and I never did anything you told me not to do before. And I want to tell you, and then you will perhaps forgive me, for it is a long while before I go to confession."

"Yes, tell me everything, my Tessa." He began to hope it was after all a trivial matter.

"Oh, you will be sorry for him: I'm afraid he cries about something when I don't see him. But that was not the reason I went to him first; it was because I wanted to talk to him and show him my baby, and he was a stranger that lived nowhere, and I thought you wouldn't care so much about my talking to him. And I think he is not a bad old man, and he wanted to come and sleep on the straw next to the goats, and I made Monna Lisa say, 'Yes, he might,' and he's away all the day almost, but when he comes back I talk to him, and take him something to eat."

"Some beggar, I suppose. It was naughty of you, Tessa, and I am angry with Monna Lisa. I must have him sent away."

"No, I think he is not a beggar, for he wanted to pay Monna Lisa, only she asked him to do work for her instead. And he gets himself shaved, and his clothes are tidy: Monna Lisa says he is a decent man. But sometimes I think he is not in his right mind: Lupo, at Peretola, was not in his right mind, and he looks a little like Lupo sometimes, as if he didn't know where he was."

"What sort of face has he?" said Tito, his heart

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beginning to beat strangely. He was so haunted by the thought of Baldassarre, that it was already he whom he saw in imagination sitting on the straw not many yards from him. "Fetch your stool, my Tessa, and sit on it."

"Shall you not forgive me?" she said, timidly, moving from his knee.

"Yes, I will not be angry—only sit down, and tell me what sort of old man this is."

"I can't think how to tell you: he is not like my stepfather Nofri, or anybody. His face is yellow, and he has deep marks in it; and his hair is white, but there is none on the top of his head: and his eyebrows are black, and he looks from under them at me, and says, 'Poor thing!' to me, as if he thought I was beaten as I used to be; and that seems as if he couldn't be in his right mind, doesn't it? And I asked him his name once, but he couldn't tell it me: yet everybody has a name—is it not true? And he has a book now, and keeps looking at it ever so long, as if he were a Padre. But I think he is not saying prayers, for his lips never move;—ah, you are angry with me, or is it because you are sorry for the old man?"

Tito's eyes were still fixed on Tessa; but he had ceased to see her, and was only seeing the objects her words suggested. It was this absent glance which frightened her, and she could not help going to kneel at his side again. But he did not heed her, and she dared not touch him, or speak to him: she knelt, trembling and wondering; and this state of mind suggesting her beads to her, she took them

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from the floor, and began to tell them again, her pretty lips moving silently, and her blue eyes wide with anxiety and struggling tears.

Tito was quite unconscious of her movements—unconscious of his own attitude: he was in that wrapt state in which a man will grasp painful roughness, and press and press it closer, and never feel it. A new possibility had risen before him, which might dissolve at once the wretched conditions of fear and suppression that were marring his life. Destiny had brought within his reach an opportunity of retrieving that moment on the steps of the Duomo, when the Past had grasped him with living quivering hands, and he had disowned it. A few steps, and he might be face to face with his father, with no witness by; he might seek forgiveness and reconciliation; and there was money now, from the sale of the library, to enable them to leave Florence without disclosure, and go into Southern Italy, where under the probable French rule, he had already laid a foundation for patronage. Romola need never know the whole truth, for she could have no certain means of identifying that prisoner in the Duomo with Baldassarre, or of learning what had taken place on the steps, except from Baldassarre himself; and if his father forgave, he would also consent to bury, that offence.

But with this possibility of relief, by an easy spring, from present evil, there rose the other possibility, that the fierce-hearted man might refuse to be propitiated. Well—and if he did, things would only be as they had been before; for there would be *no*

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witness by. It was not repentance with a white sheet round it and taper in hand, confessing its hated sin in the eyes of men, that Tito was preparing for: it was a repentance that would make all things pleasant again, and keep all past unpleasant things secret. And Tito's soft-heartedness, his indisposition to feel himself in harsh relations with any creature, was in strong activity towards his father, now his father was brought near to him. It would be a state of ease that his nature could not but desire, if the poisonous hatred in Baldassarre's glance could be replaced by something of the old affection and complacency.

Tito longed to have his world once again completely cushioned with goodwill, and longed for it the more eagerly because of what he had just suffered from the collision with Romola. It was not difficult to him to smile pleadingly on those whom he had injured, and offer to do them much kindness: and no quickness of intellect could tell him exactly the taste of that honey on the lips of the injured. The opportunity was there, and it raised an inclination which hemmed in the calculating activity of his thought. He started up, and stepped towards the door; but Tessa's cry, as she dropped her beads, roused him from his absorption. He turned and said—

"My Tessa, get me a lantern; and don't cry, little pigeon, I am not angry."

They went down the stairs, and Tessa was going to shout the need of the lantern in Monna Lisa's ear, when Tito, who had opened the door, said, "Stay,

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Tessa—no, I want no lantern: go up-stairs again, and keep quiet, and say nothing to Monna Lisa."

In half a minute he stood before the closed door of the outhouse, where the moon was shining white on the old paintless wood.

In this last decisive moment, Tito felt a tremor upon him—a sudden instinctive shrinking from a possible tiger-glance, a possible tiger-leap. Yet why should he, a young man, be afraid of an old one? a young man with armour on, of an old man without a weapon? It was but a moment's hesitation, and Tito laid his hand on the door. Was his father asleep? Was there nothing else but the door that screened him from the voice and the glance which no magic could turn into ease?

Baldassarre was not asleep. There was a square opening high in the wall of the hovel, through which the moonbeams sent in a stream of pale light; and if Tito could have looked through the opening, he would have seen his father seated on the straw, with something that shone like a white star in his hand. Baldassarre was feeling the edge of his poniard, taking refuge in that sensation from a hopeless blank of thought that seemed to lie like a great gulf between his passion and its aim.

He was in one of his most wretched moments of conscious helplessness: he had been poring, while it was light, over the book that lay open beside him; then he had been trying to recall the names of his jewels, and the symbols engraved on them; and though at certain other times he had recovered some of those names and symbols, to-night they were all

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gone into darkness. And this effort at inward seeing had seemed to end in utter paralysis of memory. He was reduced to a sort of mad consciousness that he was a solitary pulse of just rage in a world filled with defiant baseness. He had clutched and unsheathed his dagger, and for a long while had been feeling its edge, his mind narrowed to one image, and the dream of one sensation—the sensation of plunging that dagger into a base heart, which he was unable to pierce in any other way.

Tito had his hand on the door and was pulling it: it dragged against the ground as such old doors often do, and Baldassarre, startled out of his dream-like state, rose from his sitting posture in vague amazement, not knowing where he was. He had not yet risen to his feet, and was still kneeling on one knee, when the door came wide open and he saw, dark against the moonlight, with the rays falling on one bright mass of curls and one rounded olive cheek, the image of his reverie—not shadowy—close and real like water at the lips after the thirsty dream of it. No thought could come athwart that eager thirst. In one moment, before Tito could start back, the old man, with the preternatural force of rage in his limbs, had sprung forward, and the dagger had flashed out. In the next moment the dagger had snapped in two, and Baldassarre, under the parrying force of Tito's arm, had fallen back on the straw, clutching the hilt with its bit of broken blade. The pointed end lay shining against Tito's feet.

Tito had felt one great heart-leap of terror as he

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had staggered under the weight of the thrust: he felt now the triumph of deliverance and safety. His armour had been proved, and vengeance lay helpless before him. But the triumph raised no devilish impulse; on the contrary, the sight of his father close to him and unable to injure him, made the effort at reconciliation easier. He was free from fear, but he had only the more unmixed and direct want to be free from the sense that he was hated. After they had looked at each other a little while, Baldassarre lying motionless in despairing rage, Tito said in his soft tones, just as they had sounded before the last parting on the shores of Greece—

"*Padre mio!*" There was a pause after those words, but no movement or sound till he said—

"I came to ask your forgiveness!"

Again he paused, that the healing balm of those words might have time to work. But there was no sign of change in Baldassarre: he lay as he had fallen, leaning on one arm: he was trembling, but it was from the shock that had thrown him down.

"I was taken by surprise that morning. I wish now to be a son to you again. I wish to make the rest of your life happy, that you may forget what you have suffered."

He paused again. He had used the clearest and strongest words he could think of. It was useless to say more, until he had some sign that Baldassarre understood him. Perhaps his mind was too distempered or too imbecile even for that: perhaps the shock of his fall and his disappointed rage might have quite suspended the use of his faculties.

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Presently Baldassarre began to move. He threw away the broken dagger, and slowly and gradually, still trembling, began to raise himself from the ground. Tito put out his hand to help him, and so strangely quick are men's souls that in this moment, when he began to feel his atonement was accepted, he had a darting thought of the irksome efforts it entailed. Baldassarre clutched the hand that was held out, raised himself and clutched it still, going close up to Tito till their faces were not a foot off each other. Then he began to speak, in a deep trembling voice—

"I saved you — I nurtured you — I loved you. You forsook me—you robbed me—you denied me. What can you give me? You have made the world bitterness to me; but there is one draught of sweetness left—*that you shall know agony.*"

He let fall Tito's hand, and going backwards a little, first rested his arm on a projecting stone in the wall, and then sank again in a sitting posture on the straw. The outleap of fury in the dagger-thrust had evidently exhausted him.

Tito stood silent. If it had been a deep yearning emotion which had brought him to ask his father's forgiveness, the denial of it might have caused him a pang which would have excluded the rushing train of thought that followed those decisive words. As it was, though the sentence of unchangeable hatred grated on him and jarred him terribly, his mind glanced round with a self-preserving instinct to see how far those words could have the force of a substantial threat. When he had come down to

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speak to Baldassarre, he had said to himself that if his effort at reconciliation failed, things would only be as they had been before. The first glance of his mind was backward to that thought again, but the future possibilities of danger that were conjured up along with it brought the perception that things were *not* as they had been before, and the perception came as a triumphant relief. There was not only the broken dagger, there was the certainty, from what Tessa had told him, that Baldassarre's mind was broken too, and had no edge that could reach him. Tito felt he had no choice now: he must defy Baldassarre as a mad, imbecile old man; and the chances were so strongly on his side that there was hardly room for fear. No; except the fear of having to do many unpleasant things in order to save himself from what was yet more unpleasant. And one of those unpleasant things must be done immediately: it was very difficult.

"Do you mean to stay here?" he said.

"No," said Baldassarre, bitterly, "you mean to turn me out."

"Not so," said Tito; "I only ask."

"I tell you, you have turned me out. If it is your straw, you turned me off it three years ago."

"Then you mean to leave this place?" said Tito, more anxious about this certainty than the ground of it.

"I have spoken," said Baldassarre.

Tito turned and re-entered the house. Monna Lisa was nodding; he went up to Tessa, and found her crying by the side of her baby.

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"Tessa," he said, sitting down and taking her head between his hands; "leave off crying, little goose, and listen to me."

He lifted her chin upward, that she might look at him, while he spoke very distinctly and emphatically.

"You must never speak to that old man again. He is a mad old man, and he wants to kill me. Never speak to him or listen to him again."

Tessa's tears had ceased, and her lips were pale with fright.

"Is he gone away?" she whispered.

"He will go away. Remember what I have said to you."

"Yes; I will never speak to a stranger any more," said Tessa, with a sense of guilt.

He told her, to comfort her, that he would come again to-morrow; and then went down to Monna Lisa to rebuke her severely for letting a dangerous man come about the house.

Tito felt that these were odious tasks; they were very evil-tasted morsels, but they were forced upon him. He heard Monna Lisa fasten the door behind him, and turned away, without looking towards the open door of the hovel. He felt secure that Baldassarre would go, and he could not wait to see him go. Even *his* young frame and elastic spirit were shattered by the agitations that had been crowded into this single evening.

Baldassarre was still sitting on the straw when the shadow of Tito passed by. Before him lay the fragments of the broken dagger; beside him lay the

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open book, over which he had pored in vain. They looked like mocking symbols of his utter helplessness; and his body was still too trembling for him to rise and walk away.

But the next morning very early, when Tessa peeped anxiously through the hole in her shutter, the door of the hovel was open, and the strange old man was gone.

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CHAPTER XXXV.

WHAT FLORENCE WAS THINKING OF.

For several days Tito saw little of Romola. He told her gently, the next morning, that it would be better for her to remove any small articles of her own from the library, as there would be agents coming to pack up the antiquities. Then, leaning to kiss her on the brow, he suggested that she should keep in her own room where the little painted tabernacle was, and where she was then sitting, so that she might be away from the noise of strange footsteps. Romola assented quietly, making no sign of emotion: the night had been one long waking to her, and, in spite of her healthy frame, sensation had become a dull continuous pain, as if she had been stunned and bruised. Tito divined that she felt ill, but he dared say no more; he only dared, perceiving that her hand and brow were stone cold, to fetch a furred mantle and throw it lightly round her. And in every brief interval that he returned to her, the scene was nearly the same: he tried to propitiate her by some unobtrusive act or word of tenderness.

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and she seemed to have lost the power of speaking to him, or of looking at him. "Patience!" he said to himself. "She will recover it, and forgive at last. The tie to me must still remain the strongest." When the stricken person is slow to recover and look as if nothing had happened, the striker easily glides into the position of the aggrieved party; he feels no bruise himself, and is strongly conscious of his own amiable behaviour since he inflicted the blow. But Tito was not naturally disposed to feel himself aggrieved; the constant bent of his mind was towards propitiation, and he would have submitted to much for the sake of feeling Romola's hand resting on his head again, as it did that morning when he first shrank from looking at her.

But he found it the less difficult to wait patiently for the return of his home happiness, because his life out of doors was more and more interesting to him. A course of action which is in strictness a slowly-prepared outgrowth of the entire character, is yet almost always traceable to a single impression as its point of apparent origin; and since that moment in the Piazza del Duomo, when Tito, mounted on the bales, had tasted a keen pleasure in the consciousness of his ability to tickle the ears of men with any phrases that pleased them, his imagination had glanced continually towards a sort of political activity which the troubled public life of Florence was likely enough to find occasion for. But the fresh dread of Baldassarre, waked in the same moment, had lain like an immovable rocky obstruction across that path, and had urged him into the sale of the

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library, as a preparation for the possible necessity of leaving Florence, at the very time when he was beginning to feel that it had a new attraction for him. That dread was nearly removed now: he must wear his armour still, he must prepare himself for possible demands on his coolness and ingenuity, but he did not feel obliged to take the inconvenient step of leaving Florence and seeking new fortunes. His father had refused the offered atonement—had forced him into defiance; and an old man in a strange place, with his memory gone, was weak enough to be defied.

Tito's implicit desires were working themselves out now in very explicit thoughts. As the freshness of young passion faded, life was taking more and more decidedly for him the aspect of a game in which there was an agreeable mingling of skill and chance.

And the game that might be played in Florence promised to be rapid and exciting; it was a game of revolutionary and party struggle, sure to include plenty of that unavowed action in which brilliant ingenuity, able to get rid of all inconvenient beliefs except that "ginger is hot in the mouth," is apt to see the path of superior wisdom.

No sooner were the French guests gone than Florence was as agitated as a colony of ants when an alarming shadow has been removed, and the camp has to be repaired. "How are we to raise the money for the French king? How are we to manage the war with those obstinate Pisan rebels? Above all, how are we to mend our plan of govern-

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ment, so as to hit on the best way of getting our magistrates chosen and our laws voted?" Till those questions were well answered trade was in danger of standing still, and that large body of the working men who were not counted as citizens and had not so much as a vote to serve as an anodyne to their stomachs were likely to get impatient. Something must be done.

And first the great bell was sounded, to call the citizens to a parliament in the Piazza de' Signori; and when the crowd was wedged close, and hemmed in by armed men at all the outlets, the Signoria (or Gonfaloniere and eight Priors for the time being) came out and stood by the stone lion on the platform in front of the Old Palace, and proposed that twenty chief men of the city should have dictatorial authority given them, by force of which they should for one year choose all magistrates, and set the frame of government in order. And the people shouted their assent, and felt themselves the electors of the Twenty. This kind of "parliament" was a very old Florentine fashion, by which the will of the few was made to seem the choice of the many.

The shouting in the Piazza was soon at an end, but not so the debating inside the palace: was Florence to have a Great Council after the Venetian mode, where all the officers of government might be elected, and all laws voted by a wide number of citizens of a certain age and of ascertained qualifications, without question of rank or party? or, was it to be governed on a narrower and less popular scheme, in which the hereditary influence of good

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families would be less adulterated with the votes of shopkeepers. Doctors of law disputed day after day, and far on into the night. Messer Pagolantonio Soderini alleged excellent reasons on the side of the popular scheme; Messer Guidantonio Vespucci alleged reasons equally excellent on the side of a more aristocratic form. It was a question of boiled or roast, which had been prejudged by the palates of the disputants, and the excellent arguing might have been protracted a long while without any other result than that of deferring the cooking. The majority of the men inside the palace, having power already in their hands, agreed with Vespucci, and thought change should be moderate; the majority outside the palace, conscious of little power and many grievances, were less afraid of change.

And there was a force outside the palace which was gradually tending to give the vague desires of that majority the character of a determinate will. That force was the preaching of Savonarola. Impelled partly by the spiritual necessity that was laid upon him to guide the people, and partly by the prompting of public men who could get no measures carried without his aid, he was rapidly passing in his daily sermons from the general to the special—from telling his hearers that they must postpone their private passions and interests to the public good, to telling them precisely what sort of government they must have in order to promote that good—from "Choose whatever is best for all" to "Choose the Great Council," and "the Great Council is the will of God."

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To Savonarola these were as good as identical propositions. The Great Council was the only practicable plan for giving an expression to the public will large enough to counteract the vitiating influence of party interests: it was a plan that would make honest impartial public action at least possible. And the purer the government of Florence would become—the more secure from the designs of men who saw their own advantage in the moral debasement of their fellows—the nearer would the Florentine people approach the character of a pure community, worthy to lead the way in the renovation of the Church and the world. And Fra Girolamo's mind never stopped short of that sublimest end: the objects towards which he felt himself working had always the same moral magnificence. He had no private malice—he sought no petty gratification. Even in the last terrible days, when ignominy, torture, and the fear of torture, had laid bare every hidden weakness of his soul, he could say to his importunate judges: "Do not wonder if it seems to you that I have told but few things; for my purposes were few and great."[1]

[1] "Se vi pare che io abbia detto poche cose, non ve ne maravigliate, perchè le mie cose erano poche e grandi."

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CHAPTER XXXVI.

ARIADNE DISCROWNS HERSELF.

It was more than three weeks before the contents of the library were all packed and carried away. And Romola, instead of shutting her eyes and ears, had watched the process. The exhaustion consequent on violent emotion is apt to bring a dreamy disbelief in the reality of its cause; and in the evening, when the workmen were gone, Romola took her hand-lamp and walked slowly round amongst the confusion of straw and wooden cases, pausing at every vacant pedestal, every well-known object laid prostrate, with a sort of bitter desire to assure herself that there was a sufficient reason why her love was gone and the world was barren for her. And still, as the evenings came, she went and went again; no longer to assure herself, but because this vivifying of pain and despair about her father's memory was the strongest life left to her affections. On the 23d of December, she knew that the last packages were going. She ran to the loggia at the top of the house that she might not lose the last

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pang of seeing the slow wheels move across the bridge.

It was a cloudy day, and nearing dusk. Arno ran dark and shivering; the hills were mournful; and Florence with its girdling stone towers had that silent, tomb-like look, which unbroken shadow gives to a city seen from above. Santa Croce, where her father lay, was dark amidst that darkness, and slowly crawling over the bridge, and slowly vanishing up the narrow street, was the white load, like a cruel, deliberate Fate carrying away her father's lifelong hope to bury it in an unmarked grave. Romola felt less that she was seeing this herself than that her father was conscious of it as he lay helpless under the imprisoning stones, where her hand could not reach his to tell him that he was not alone.

She stood still even after the load had disappeared, heedless of the cold, and soothed by the gloom which seemed to cover her like a mourning garment and shut out the discord of joy. When suddenly the great bell in the palace-tower rang out a mighty peal: not the hammer-sound of alarm, but an agitated peal of triumph; and one after another every other bell in every other tower seemed to catch the vibration and join the chorus. And, as the chorus swelled and swelled till the air seemed made of sound—little flames, vibrating too, as if the sound had caught fire, burst out between the turrets of the palace and on the girdling towers.

That sudden clang, that leaping light, fell on Romola like sharp wounds. They were the triumph of demons at the success of her husband's treachery,

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and the desolation of her life. Little more than three weeks ago she had been intoxicated with the sound of those very bells; and in the gladness of Florence, she had heard a prophecy of her own gladness. But now the general joy seemed cruel to her: she stood aloof from that common life—that Florence which was flinging out its loud exultation to stun the ears of sorrow and loneliness. She could never join hands with gladness again, but only with those whom it was in the hard nature of gladness to forget. And in her bitterness she felt that all rejoicing was mockery. Men shouted pæans with their souls full of heaviness, and then looked in their neighbours' faces to see if there was really such a thing as joy. Romola had lost her belief in the happiness she had once thirsted for: it was a hateful, smiling, soft-handed thing, with a narrow, selfish heart.

She ran down from the loggia, with her hands pressed against her ears, and was hurrying across the ante-chamber, when she was startled by unexpectedly meeting her husband, who was coming to seek her.

His step was elastic, and there was a radiance of satisfaction about him not quite usual.

"What! the noise was a little too much for you?" he said; for Romola, as she started at the sight of him, had pressed her hands all the closer against her ears. He took her gently by the wrist, and drew her arm within his, leading her into the saloon surrounded with the dancing nymphs and fauns, and then went on speaking: "Florence is gone quite

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mad at getting its Great Council, which is to put an end to all the evils under the sun; especially to the vice of merriment. You may well look stunned, my Romola, and you are cold. You must not stay so late under that windy loggia without wrappings. I was coming to tell you that I am suddenly called to Rome about some learned business for Bernardo Rucellai. I am going away immediately, for I am to join my party at San Gaggio to-night, that we may start early in the morning. I need give you no trouble; I have had my packages made already. It will not be very long before I am back again."

He knew he had nothing to expect from her but quiet endurance of what he said and did. He could not even venture to kiss her brow this evening, but just pressed her hand to his lips, and left her. Tito felt that Romola was a more unforgiving woman than he had imagined; her love was not that sweet clinging instinct, stronger than all judgments, which, he began to see now, made the great charm of a wife. Still, this petrified coldness was better than a passionate, futile opposition. Her pride and capability of seeing where resistance was useless had their convenience.

But when the door had closed on Tito, Romola lost the look of cold immobility which came over her like an inevitable frost whenever he approached her. Inwardly she was very far from being in a state of quiet endurance, and the days that had passed since the scene which had divided her from Tito had been days of active planning and preparation for the fulfilment of a purpose.

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The first thing she did now was to call old Maso to her.

"Maso," she said, in a decided tone, "we take our journey to-morrow morning. We shall be able now to overtake that first convoy of cloth, while they are waiting at San Piero. See about the two mules to-night, and be ready to set off with them at break of day, and wait for me at Trespiano."

She meant to take Maso with her as far as Bologna, and then send him back with letters to her godfather and Tito, telling them that she was gone and never meant to return. She had planned her departure so that its secrecy might be perfect, and her broken love and life be hidden away unscanned by vulgar eyes. Bernardo del Nero had been absent at his villa, willing to escape from political suspicions to his favourite occupation of attending to his land, and she had paid him the debt without a personal interview. He did not even know that the library was sold, and was left to conjecture that some sudden piece of good fortune had enabled Tito to raise this sum of money. Maso had been taken into her confidence only so far that he knew her intended journey was a secret; and to do just what she told him was the thing he cared most for in his withered wintry age.

Romola did not mean to go to bed that night. When she had fastened the door she took her taper to the carved and painted chest which contained her wedding-clothes. The white silk and gold lay there, the long white veil and the circlet of pearls. A great sob rose as she looked at them: they seemed

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the shroud of her dead happiness. In a tiny gold loop of the circlet a sugar-plum had lodged — a pink hailstone from the shower of sweets: Tito had detected it first, and had said that it should always remain there. At certain moments—and this was one of them—Romola was carried, by a sudden wave of memory, back again into the time of perfect trust, and felt again the presence of the husband whose love made the world as fresh and wonderful to her as to a little child that sits in stillness among the sunny flowers: heard the gentle tones and saw the soft eyes without any lie in them, and breathed again that large freedom of the soul which comes from the faith that the being who is nearest to us is greater than ourselves. And in those brief moments the tears always rose: the woman's lovingness felt something akin to what the bereaved mother feels when the tiny fingers seem to lie warm on her bosom, and yet are marble to her lips as she bends over the silent bed.

But there was something else lying in the chest besides the wedding-clothes: it was something dark and coarse, rolled up in a close bundle. She turned away her eyes from the white and gold to the dark bundle, and as her hands touched the serge, her tears began to be checked. That coarse roughness recalled her fully to the present, from which love and delight were gone. She unfastened the thick white cord and spread the bundle out on the table. It was the grey serge dress of a sister belonging to the third order of St Francis, living in the world but especially devoted to deeds of piety—a person-

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age whom the Florentines were accustomed to call a Pinzochera. Romola was going to put on this dress as a disguise, and she determined to put it on at once, so that, if she needed sleep before the morning, she might wake up in perfect readiness to be gone. She put off her black garment, and as she thrust her soft white arms into the harsh sleeves of the serge mantle and felt the hard girdle of rope hurt her fingers as she tied it, she courted those rude sensations: they were in keeping with her new scorn of that thing called pleasure which made men base—that dexterous contrivance for selfish ease, that shrinking from endurance and strain, when others were bowing beneath burdens too heavy for them, which now made one image with her husband.

Then she gathered her long hair together, drew it away tight from her face, bound it in a great hard knot at the back of her head, and taking a square piece of black silk, tied it in the fashion of a kerchief close across her head and under her chin; and over that she drew the cowl. She lifted the candle to the mirror. Surely her disguise would be complete to any one who had not lived very near to her. To herself she looked strangely like her brother Dino: the full oval of the cheek had only to be wasted; the eyes, already sad, had only to become a little sunken. Was she getting more like him in anything else? Only in this, that she understood now how men could be prompted to rush away for ever from earthly delights, how they could be prompted to dwell on images of sorrow rather than of beauty and joy.

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But she did not linger at the mirror: she set about collecting and packing all the relics of her father and mother that were too large to be carried in her small travelling-wallet. They were all to be put in the chest along with her wedding-clothes, and the chest was to be committed to her godfather when she was safely gone. First she laid in the portraits; then one by one every little thing that had a sacred memory clinging to it was put into her wallet or into the chest.

She paused. There was still something else to be stript away from her, belonging to that past on which she was going to turn her back for ever. She put her thumb and her forefinger to her betrothal ring; but they rested there, without drawing it off. Romola's mind had been rushing with an impetuous current towards this act, for which she was preparing: the act of quitting a husband who had disappointed all her trust, the act of breaking an outward tie that no longer represented the inward bond of love. But that force of outward symbols by which our active life is knit together so as to make an inexorable external identity for us, not to be shaken by our wavering consciousness, gave a strange effect to this simple movement towards taking off her ring —a movement which was but a small sequence of her energetic resolution. It brought a vague but arresting sense that she was somehow violently rending her life in two: a presentiment that the strong impulse which had seemed to exclude doubt and make her path clear might after all be blindness, and that there was something in human bonds

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which must prevent them from being broken with the breaking of illusions.

If that beloved Tito who had placed the betrothal ring on her finger was not in any valid sense the same Tito whom she had ceased to love, why should she return to him the sign of their union, and not rather retain it as a memorial? And this act, which came as a palpable demonstration of her own and his identity, had a power unexplained to herself, of shaking Romola. It is the way with half the truth amidst which we live, that it only haunts us and makes dull pulsations that are never born into sound. But there was a passionate voice speaking within her that presently nullified all such muffled murmurs.

"It cannot be! I cannot be subject to him. He is false. I shrink from him. I despise him!"

She snatched the ring from her finger and laid it on the table against the pen with which she meant to write. Again she felt that there could be no law for her but the law of her affections. That tenderness and keen fellow-feeling for the near and the loved which are the main outgrowth of the affections, had made the religion of her life: they had made her patient in spite of natural impetuosity; they would have sufficed to make her heroic. But now all that strength was gone, or, rather, it was converted into the strength of repulsion. She had recoiled from Tito in proportion to the energy of that young belief and love which he had disappointed, of that lifelong devotion to her father against which he had committed an irredeemable

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offence. And it seemed as if all motive had slipped away from her, except the indignation and scorn that made her tear herself asunder from him.

She was not acting after any precedent, or obeying any adopted maxims. The grand severity of the stoical philosophy in which her father had taken care to instruct her, was familiar enough to her ears and lips, and its lofty spirit had raised certain echoes within her; but she had never used it, never needed it as a rule of life. She had endured and forborne because she loved: maxims which told her to feel less, and not to cling close lest the onward course of great Nature should jar her, had been as powerless on her tenderness as they had been on her father's yearning for just fame. She had appropriated no theories: she had simply felt strong in the strength of affection, and life without that energy came to her as an entirely new problem.

She was going to solve the problem in a way that seemed to her very simple. Her mind had never yet bowed to any obligation apart from personal love and reverence; she had no keen sense of any other human relations, and all she had to obey now was the instinct to sever herself from the man she loved no longer.

Yet the unswerving resolution was accompanied with continually varying phases of anguish. And now that the active preparation for her departure was almost finished, she lingered: she deferred writing the irrevocable words of parting from all her little world. The emotions of the past weeks seemed to rush in again with cruel hurry, and take posses-

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sion even of her limbs. She was going to write, and her hand fell. Bitter tears came now at the delusion which had blighted her young years: tears very different from the sob of remembered happiness with which she had looked at the circlet of pearls and the pink hailstone. And now she felt a tingling shame at the words of ignominy she had cast at Tito—"Have you robbed some one else who is *not* dead?" To have had such words wrung from her—to have uttered them to her husband seemed a degradation of her whole life. Hard speech between those who have loved is hideous in the memory, like the sight of greatness and beauty sunk into vice and rags.

That heart-cutting comparison of the present with the past urged itself upon Romola till it even transformed itself into wretched sensations: she seemed benumbed to everything but inward throbbings, and began to feel the need of some hard contact. She drew her hands tight along the harsh knotted cord that hung from her waist. She started to her feet and seized the rough lid of the chest: there was nothing else to go in? No. She closed the lid, pressing her hand upon the rough carving, and locked it.

Then she remembered that she had still to complete her equipment as a Pinzochera. The large leather purse or scarsella, with small coin in it, had to be hung on the cord at her waist (her florins and small jewels, presents from her godfather and cousin Brigida, were safely fastened within her serge mantle)—and on the other side must hang the rosary.

It did not occur to Romola, as she hung that

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rosary by her side, that something else besides the mere garb would perhaps be necessary to enable her to pass as a Pinzochera, and that her whole air and expression were as little as possible like those of a sister whose eyelids were used to be bent, and whose lips were used to move in silent iteration. Her inexperience prevented her from picturing distant details, and it helped her proud courage in shutting out any foreboding of danger and insult. She did not know that any Florentine woman had ever done exactly what she was going to do: unhappy wives often took refuge with their friends, or in the cloister, she knew, but both those courses were impossible to her; she had invented a lot for herself—to go to the most learned woman in the world, Cassandra Fedele, at Venice, and ask her how an instructed woman could support herself in a lonely life there.

She was not daunted by the practical difficulties in the way or the dark uncertainty at the end. Her life could never be happy any more, but it must not, could not, be ignoble. And by a pathetic mixture of childish romance with her woman's trials, the philosophy which had nothing to do with this great decisive deed of hers had its place in her imagination of the future: so far as she conceived her solitary loveless life at all, she saw it animated by a proud stoical heroism, and by an indistinct but strong purpose of labour, that she might be wise enough to write something which would rescue her father's name from oblivion. After all, she was only a young girl—this poor Romola, who had found herself at the end of her joys.

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There were other things yet to be done. There was a small key in a casket on the table—but now Romola perceived that her taper was dying out, and she had forgotten to provide herself with any other light. In a few moments the room was in total darkness. Feeling her way to the nearest chair, she sat down to wait for the morning.

Her purpose in seeking the key had called up certain memories which had come back upon her during the past week with the new vividness that remembered words always have for us when we have learned to give them a new meaning. Since the shock of the revelation which had seemed to divide her for ever from Tito, that last interview with Dino had never been for many hours together out of her mind. And it solicited her all the more, because while its remembered images pressed upon her almost with the imperious force of sensations, they raised struggling thoughts which resisted their influence. She could not prevent herself from hearing inwardly the dying prophetic voice saying again and again,—"The man whose face was a blank loosed thy hand and departed; and as he went, I could see his face, and it was the face of the great Tempter . . . And thou, Romola, didst wring thy hands and seek for water, and there was none . . . and the plain was bare and stony again, and thou wast alone in the midst of it. And then it seemed that the night fell, and I saw no more." She could not prevent herself from dwelling with a sort of agonised fascination on the wasted face; on the straining gaze at the crucifix; on the awe which

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had compelled her to kneel; on the last broken words and then the unbroken silence — on all the details of the death-scene, which had seemed like a sudden opening into a world apart from that of her life-long knowledge.

But her mind was roused to resistance of impressions that, from being obvious phantoms, seemed to be getting solid in the daylight. As a strong body struggles against fumes with the more violence when they begin to be stifling, a strong soul struggles against phantasies with all the more alarmed energy when they threaten to govern in the place of thought.

What had the words of that vision to do with her real sorrows? That fitting of certain words was a mere chance; the rest was all vague—nay, those words themselves were vague; they were determined by nothing but her brother's memories and beliefs. He believed there was something fatal in pagan learning; he believed that celibacy was more holy than marriage; he remembered their home, and all the objects in the library; and of these threads the vision was woven. What reasonable warrant could she have had for believing in such a vision and acting on it? None. True as the voice of foreboding had proved, Romola saw with unshaken conviction that to have renounced Tito in obedience to a warning like that, would have been meagre-hearted folly. Her trust had been delusive, but she would have chosen over again to have acted on it rather than be a creature led by phantoms and disjointed whispers in a world where there was the large

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music of reasonable speech, and the warm grasp of living hands.

But the persistent presence of these memories, linking themselves in her imagination with her actual lot, gave her a glimpse of understanding into the lives which had before lain utterly aloof from her sympathy—the lives of the men and women who were led by such inward images and voices.

"If they were only a little stronger in me," she said to herself, "I should lose the sense of what that vision really was, and take it for a prophetic light. I might in time get to be a seer of visions myself, like the Suora Maddalena, and Camilla Rucellai, and the rest."

Romola shuddered at the possibility. All the instruction, all the main influences of her life had gone to fortify her scorn of that sickly superstition which led men and women, with eyes too weak for the daylight, to sit in dark swamps and try to read human destiny by the chance flame of wandering vapours.

And yet she was conscious of something deeper than that coincidence of words which made the parting contact with her dying brother live anew in her mind, and gave a new sisterhood to the wasted face. If there were much more of such experience as his in the world, she would like to understand it—would even like to learn the thoughts of men who sank in ecstasy before the pictured agonies of martyrdom. There seemed to be something more than madness in that supreme fellowship with suffering. The springs were all dried up around her; she wondered what

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other waters there were at which men drank and found strength in the desert. And those moments in the Duomo when she had sobbed with a mysterious mingling of rapture and pain, while Fra Girolamo offered himself a willing sacrifice for the people, came back to her as if they had been a transient taste of some such far-off fountain. But again she shrank from impressions that were alluring her within the sphere of visions and narrow fears which compelled men to outrage natural affections as Dino had done.

This was the tangled web that Romola had in her mind as she sat weary in the darkness. No radiant angel came across the gloom with a clear message for her. In those times, as now, there were human beings who never saw angels or heard perfectly clear messages. Such truth as came to them was brought confusedly in the voices and deeds of men not at all like the seraphs of unfailing wing and piercing vision—men who believed falsities as well as truths, and did the wrong as well as the right. The helping hands stretched out to them were the hands of men who stumbled and often saw dimly, so that these beings unvisited by angels had no other choice than to grasp that stumbling guidance along the path of reliance and action which is the path of life, or else to pause in loneliness and disbelief, which is no path, but the arrest of inaction and death.

And so Romola, seeing no ray across the darkness, and heavy with conflict that changed nothing, sank at last to sleep.

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CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TABERNACLE UNLOCKED.

Romola was waked by a tap at the door. The cold light of early morning was in the room, and Maso was come for the travelling wallet. The old man could not help starting when she opened the door, and showed him, instead of the graceful outline he had been used to, crowned with the brightness of her hair, the thick folds of the grey mantle and the pale face shadowed by the dark cowl.

"It is well, Maso," said Romola, trying to speak in the calmest voice, and make the old man easy. "Here is the wallet quite ready. You will go on quietly, and I shall not be far behind you. When you get out of the gates you may go more slowly, for I shall perhaps join you before you get to Trespiano."

She closed the door behind him, and then put her hand on the key which she had taken from the casket the last thing in the night. It was the original key of the little painted tabernacle: Tito had forgotten to drown it in the Arno, and it had lodged, as

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such small things will, in the corner of the embroidered scarsella which he wore with the purple tunic. One day, long after their marriage, Romola had found it there, and had put it by, without using it, but with a sense of satisfaction that the key was within reach. The cabinet on which the tabernacle stood had been moved to the side of the room, close to one of the windows, where the pale morning light fell upon it so as to make the painted forms discernible enough to Romola, who knew them well,—the triumphant Bacchus, with his clusters and his vine-clad spear, clasping the crowned Ariadne; the Loves showering roses, the wreathed vessel, the cunning-eyed dolphins, and the rippled sea: all encircled by a flowery border, like a bower of paradise. Romola looked at the familiar images with new bitterness and repulsion: they seemed a more pitiable mockery than ever on this chill morning, when she had waked up to wander in loneliness. They had been no tomb of sorrow, but a lying screen. Foolish Ariadne! with her gaze of love, as if that bright face, with its hyacinthine curls like tendrils among the vines, held the deep secret of her life!

"Ariadne is wonderfully transformed," thought Romola. "She would look strange among the vines and the roses now."

She took up the mirror, and looked at herself once more. But the sight was so startling in this morning light that she laid it down again, with a sense of shrinking almost as strong as that with which she had turned from the joyous Ariadne. The recogni-

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tion of her own face, with the cowl about it, brought back the dread lest she should be drawn at last into fellowship with some wretched superstition—into the company of the howling fanatics and weeping nuns who had been her contempt from childhood till now. She thrust the key into the tabernacle hurriedly: hurriedly she opened it, and took out the crucifix, without looking at it; then, with trembling fingers, she passed a cord through the little ring, hung the crucifix round her neck, and hid it in the bosom of her mantle. "For Dino's sake," she said to herself.

Still there were the letters to be written which Maso was to carry back from Bologna. They were very brief. The first said—

"Tito, my love for you is dead; and therefore, so far as I was yours, I too am dead. Do not try to put in force any laws for the sake of fetching me back: that would bring you no happiness. The Romola you married can never return. I need explain nothing to you after the words I uttered to you the last time we spoke long together. If you supposed them to be words of transient anger, you will know now that they were the sign of an irreversible change.

"I think you will fulfil my wish that my bridal chest should be sent to my godfather, who gave it me. It contains my wedding-clothes and the portraits and other relics of my father and mother."

She folded the ring inside this letter, and wrote Tito's name outside. The next letter was to Bernardo del Nero:—

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"DEAREST GODFATHER,—If I could have been any good to your life by staying I would not have gone away to a distance. But now I am gone. Do not ask the reason; and if you love my father, try to prevent any one from seeking me. I could not bear my life at Florence. I cannot bear to tell any one why. Help to cover my lot in silence. I have asked that my bridal chest should be sent to you: when you open it, you will know the reason. Please to give all the things that were my mother's to my cousin Brigida, and ask her to forgive me for not saying any words of parting to her.

"Farewell, my second father. The best thing I have in life is still to remember your goodness and be grateful to you. ROMOLA."

Romola put the letters, along with the crucifix, within the bosom of her mantle, and then felt that everything was done. She was ready now to depart.

No one was stirring in the house, and she went almost as quietly as a grey phantom down the stairs and into the silent street. Her heart was palpitating violently, yet she enjoyed the sense of her firm tread on the broad flags—of the swift movement, which was like a chained-up resolution set free at last. The anxiety to carry out her act, and the dread of any obstacle, averted sorrow; and as she reached the Ponte Rubaconte, she felt less that Santa Croce was in her sight than that the yellow streak of morning which parted the grey was getting broader and broader, and that, unless she hastened her steps, she should have to encounter faces.

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Her simplest road was to go right on to the Borgo Pinti, and then along by the walls to the Porta San Gallo, from which she must leave the city, and this road carried her by the Piazza di Santa Croce. But she walked as steadily and rapidly as ever through the piazza, not trusting herself to look towards the church. The thought that any eyes might be turned on her with a look of curiosity and recognition, and that indifferent minds might be set speculating on her private sorrows, made Romola shrink physically as from the imagination of torture. She felt degraded even by that act of her husband from which she was helplessly suffering. But there was no sign that any eyes looked forth from windows to notice this tall grey sister, with the firm step, and proud attitude of the cowled head. Her road lay aloof from the stir of early traffic, and when she reached the Porta San Gallo, it was easy to pass while a dispute was going forward about the toll for panniers of eggs and market produce which were just entering.

Out! Once past the houses of the Borgo, she would be beyond the last fringe of Florence, the sky would be broad above her, and she would have entered on her new life—a life of loneliness and endurance, but of freedom. She had been strong enough to snap asunder the bonds she had accepted in blind faith: whatever befell her, she would no more feel the breath of soft hated lips warm upon her cheek, no longer feel the breath of an odious mind stifling her own. The bare wintry morning, the chill air, were welcome in their severity: the leafless

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trees, the sombre hills, were not haunted by the gods of beauty and joy, whose worship she had forsaken for ever.

But presently the light burst forth with sudden strength, and shadows were thrown across the road. It seemed that the sun was going to chase away the greyness. The light is perhaps never felt more strongly as a divine presence stirring all those inarticulate sensibilities which are our deepest life, than in these moments when it instantaneously awakens the shadows. A certain awe which inevitably accompanied this most momentous act of her life became a more conscious element in Romola's feeling as she found herself in the sudden presence of the impalpable golden glory and the long shadow of herself that was not to be escaped. Hitherto she had met no one but an occasional contadino with mules, and the many turnings of the road on the level prevented her from seeing that Maso was not very far ahead of her. But when she had passed Pietra and was on rising ground, she lifted up the hanging roof of her cowl and looked eagerly before her.

The cowl was dropped again immediately. She had seen, not Maso, but — two monks, who were approaching within a few yards of her. The edge of her cowl making a pent-house on her brow had shut out the objects above the level of her eyes, and for the last few moments she had been looking at nothing but the brightness on the path and at her own shadow, tall and shrouded like a dread spectre.

She wished now that she had not looked up. Her

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disguise made her especially dislike to encounter monks: they might expect some pious passwords of which she knew nothing, and she walked along with a careful appearance of unconsciousness till she had seen the skirts of the black mantles pass by her. The encounter had made her heart beat disagreeably, for Romola had an uneasiness in her religious disguise, a shame at this studied concealment, which was made more distinct by a special effort to appear unconscious under actual glances.

But the black skirts would be gone the faster because they were going down-hill; and seeing a great flat stone against a cypress that rose from a projecting green bank, she yielded to the desire which the slight shock had given her, to sit down and rest.

She turned her back on Florence, not meaning to look at it till the monks were quite out of sight; and raising the edge of her cowl again when she had seated herself, she discerned Maso and the mules at a distance where it was not hopeless for her to overtake them, as the old man would probably linger in expectation of her.

Meanwhile she might pause a little. She was free and alone.

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CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE BLACK MARKS BECOME MAGICAL.

THAT journey of Tito's to Rome, which had removed many difficulties from Romola's departure, had been resolved on quite suddenly, at a supper, only the evening before.

Tito had set out towards that supper with agreeable expectations. The meats were likely to be delicate, the wines choice, the company distinguished; for the place of entertainment was the Selva or Orto de' Rucellai, or, as we should say, the Rucellai Gardens; and the host, Bernardo Rucellai, was quite a typical Florentine grandee. Even his family name has a significance which is prettily symbolic: properly understood, it may bring before us a little lichen, popularly named *orcella* or *roccella*, which grows on the rocks of Greek isles and in the Canaries; and having drunk a great deal of light into its little stems and button-heads, will, under certain circumstances, give it out again as a reddish purple dye, very grateful to the eyes of men. By bringing the excellent secret of this dye, called

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oricello, from the Levant to Florence, a certain merchant, who lived nearly a hundred years before our Bernardo's time, won for himself and his descendants much wealth, and the pleasantly-suggestive surname of Oricellari, or Roccellari, which on Tuscan tongues speedily became Rucellai.

And our Bernardo, who stands out more prominently than the rest on this purple background, had added all sorts of distinction to the family name: he had married the sister of Lorenzo de' Medici, and had had the most splendid wedding in the memory of Florentine upholstery; and for these and other virtues he had been sent on embassies to France and Venice, and had been chosen Gonfaloniere; he had not only built himself a fine palace, but had finished putting the black and white marble façade to the church of Santa Maria Novella; he had planted a garden with rare trees, and had made it classic ground by receiving within it the meetings of the Platonic Academy, orphaned by the death of Lorenzo; he had written an excellent, learned book, of a new topographical sort, about ancient Rome; he had collected antiquities; he had a pure Latinity. The simplest account of him, one sees, reads like a laudatory epitaph, at the end of which the Greek and Ausonian Muses might be confidently requested to tear their hair, and Nature to desist from any second attempt to combine so many virtues with one set of viscera.

His invitation had been conveyed to Tito through Lorenzo Tornabuoni, with an emphasis which would have suggested that the object of the gathering was

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political, even if the public questions of the time had been less absorbing. As it was, Tito felt sure that some party purposes were to be furthered by the excellent flavours of stewed fish and old Greek wine; for Bernardo Rucellai was not simply an influential personage, he was one of the elect Twenty who for three weeks had held the reins of Florence. This assurance put Tito in the best spirits as he made his way to the Via della Scala, where the classic garden was to be found: without it, he might have had some uneasy speculation as to whether the high company he would have the honour of meeting was likely to be dull as well as distinguished; for he had had experience of various dull suppers even in the Rucellai gardens, and especially of the dull philosophic sort, wherein he had not only been called upon to accept an entire scheme of the universe (which would have been easy to him), but to listen to an exposition of the same, from the origin of things to their complete ripeness in the tractate of the philosopher then speaking.

It was a dark evening, and it was only when Tito crossed the occasional light of a lamp suspended before an image of the Virgin, that the outline of his figure was discernible enough for recognition. At such moments any one caring to watch his passage from one of these lights to another might have observed that the tall and graceful personage with the mantle folded round him was followed constantly by a very different form, thick-set and elderly, in a serge tunic and felt hat. The conjunction might have been taken for mere chance, since

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there were many passengers along the streets at this hour. But when Tito stopped at the gate of the Rucellai gardens, the figure behind stopped too. The *sportello*, or smaller door of the gate, was already being held open by the servant, who, in the distraction of attending to some question, had not yet closed it since the last arrival, and Tito turned in rapidly, giving his name to the servant, and passing on between the evergreen bushes that shone like metal in the torchlight. The follower turned in too.

"Your name?" said the servant.

"Baldassarre Calvo," was the immediate answer.

"You are not a guest; the guests have all passed."

"I belong to Tito Melema, who has just gone in. I am to wait in the gardens."

The servant hesitated. "I had orders to admit only guests. Are you a servant of Messer Tito?"

"No, friend, I am not a servant; I am a scholar."

There are men to whom you need only say, "I am a buffalo," in a certain tone of quiet confidence, and they will let you pass. The porter gave way at once, Baldassarre entered, and heard the door closed and chained behind him, as he too disappeared among the shining bushes.

Those ready and firm answers argued a great change in Baldassarre since the last meeting face to face with Tito, when the dagger broke in two. The change had declared itself in a startling way.

At the moment when the shadow of Tito passed

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in front of the hovel as he departed homeward, Baldassarre was sitting in that state of after-tremor known to every one who is liable to great outbursts of passion: a state in which physical powerlessness is sometimes accompanied by an exceptional lucidity of thought, as if that disengagement of excited passion had carried away a fire-mist and left clearness behind it. He felt unable to rise and walk away just yet; his limbs seemed benumbed; he was cold, and his hands shook. But in that bodily helplessness he sat surrounded, not by the habitual dimness and vanishing shadows, but by the clear images of the past; he was living again in an unbroken course through that life which seemed a long preparation for the taste of bitterness.

For some minutes he was too thoroughly absorbed by the images to reflect on the fact that he saw them, and note the fact as a change. But when that sudden clearness had travelled through the distance, and came at last to rest on the scene just gone by, he felt fully where he was: he remembered Monna Lisa and Tessa. Ah! *he* then was the mysterious husband; he who had another wife in the Via de' Bardi. It was time to pick up the broken dagger and go — go and leave no trace of himself; for to hide his feebleness seemed the thing most like power that was left to him. He leaned to take up the fragments of the dagger; then he turned towards the book which lay open at his side. It was a fine large manuscript, an odd volume of Pausanias. The moonlight was upon it, and he

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could see the large letters at the head of the page:

ΜΕΣΣΗΝΙΚΑ. ΚΒ'.

In old days he had known Pausanias familiarly; yet an hour or two ago he had been looking hopelessly at that page, and it had suggested no more meaning to him than if the letters had been black weather-marks on a wall; but at this moment they were once more the magic signs that conjure up a world. That moonbeam falling on the letters had raised Messenia before him, and its struggle against the Spartan oppression.

He snatched up the book, but the light was too pale for him to read further by. No matter: he knew that chapter; he read inwardly. He saw the stoning of the traitor Aristocrates — stoned by a whole people, who cast him out from their borders to lie unburied, and set up a pillar with verses upon it telling how Time had brought home justice to the unjust. The words arose within him, and stirred innumerable vibrations of memory. He forgot that he was old: he could almost have shouted. The light was come again, mother of knowledge and joy! In that exultation his limbs recovered their strength: he started up with his broken dagger and book, and went out under the broad moonlight.

It was a nipping frosty air, but Baldassarre could feel no chill—he only felt the glow of conscious power. He walked about and paused on all the open spots of that high ground, and looked down

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on the domed and towered city, sleeping darkly under its sleeping guardians, the mountains; on the pale gleam of the river; on the valley vanishing towards the peaks of snow; and felt himself master of them all.

That sense of mental empire which belongs to us all in moments of exceptional clearness was intensified for him by the long days and nights in which memory had been little more than the consciousness of something gone. That city, which had been a weary labyrinth, was material that he could subdue to his purposes now: his mind glanced through its affairs with flashing conjecture; he was once more a man who knew cities, whose sense of vision was instructed with large experience, and who felt the keen delight of holding all things in the grasp of language. Names! Images!—his mind rushed through its wealth without pausing, like one who enters on a great inheritance.

But amidst all that rushing eagerness there was one End presiding in Baldassarre's consciousness,—a dark deity in the inmost cell, who only seemed forgotten while his hecatomb was being prepared. And when the first triumph in the certainty of recovered power had had its way, his thoughts centred themselves on Tito. That fair slippery viper could not escape him now; thanks to struggling justice, the heart that never quivered with tenderness for another had its sensitive selfish fibres that could be reached by the sharp point of anguish. The soul that bowed to no right, bowed to the great lord of mortals, Pain.

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He could search into every secret of Tito's life now: he knew some of the secrets already, and the failure of the broken dagger, which seemed like frustration, had been the beginning of achievement. Doubtless that sudden rage had shaken away the obstruction which stifled his soul. Twice before, when his memory had partially returned, it had been in consequence of sudden excitation: once when he had had to defend himself from an enraged dog: once when he had been overtaken by the waves, and had had to scramble up a rock to save himself.

Yes, but if this time, as then, the light were to die out, and the dreary conscious blank come back again! This time the light was stronger and steadier; but what security was there that before the morrow the dark fog would not be round him again? Even the fear seemed like the beginning of feebleness: he thought with alarm that he might sink the faster for this excited vigil of his on the hill, which was expending his force; and after seeking anxiously for a sheltered corner where he might lie down, he nestled at last against a heap of warm garden straw, and so fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes again it was daylight. The first moments were filled with strange bewilderment: he was a man with a double identity; to which had he awaked? to the life of dim-sighted sensibilities like the sad heirship of some fallen greatness, or to the life of recovered power? Surely the last, for the events of the night all came back to him: the recognition of the page

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in Pausanias, the crowding resurgence of facts and names, the sudden wide prospect which had given him such a moment as that of the Mænad in the glorious amaze of her morning waking on the mountain top.

He took up the book again, he read, he remembered without reading. He saw a name, and the images of deeds rose with it: he saw the mention of a deed, and he linked it with a name. There were stories of inexpiable crimes, but stories also of guilt that seemed successful. There were sanctuaries for swift-footed miscreants: baseness had its armour, and the weapons of justice sometimes broke against it. What then? If baseness triumphed everywhere else, if it could heap to itself all the goods of the world and even hold the keys of hell, it would never triumph over the hatred which it had itself awakened. It could devise no torture that would seem greater than the torture of submitting to its smile. Baldassarre felt the indestructible independent force of a supreme emotion, which knows no terror, and asks for no motive, which is itself an ever-burning motive, consuming all other desire. And now in this morning light, when the assurance came again that the fine fibres of association were active still, and that his recovered self had not departed, all his gladness was but the hope of vengeance.

From that time till the evening on which we have seen him enter the Rucellai gardens, he had been incessantly, but cautiously, inquiring into Tito's

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position and all his circumstances, and there was hardly a day on which he did not contrive to follow his movements. But he wished not to arouse any alarm in Tito: he wished to secure a moment when the hated favourite of blind fortune was at the summit of confident ease, surrounded by chief men on whose favour he depended. It was not any retributive payment or recognition of himself for his own behoof, on which Baldassarre's whole soul was bent: it was to find the sharpest edge of disgrace and shame by which a selfish smiler could be pierced; it was to send through his marrow the most sudden shock of dread. He was content to lie hard, and live stintedly — he had spent the greater part of his remaining money in buying another poniard: his hunger and his thirst were after nothing exquisite but an exquisite vengeance. He had avoided addressing himself to any one whom he suspected of intimacy with Tito, lest an alarm raised in Tito's mind should urge him either to flight or to some other counteracting measure which hard-pressed ingenuity might devise. For this reason he had never entered Nello's shop, which he observed that Tito frequented, and he had turned aside to avoid meeting Piero di Cosimo.

The possibility of frustration gave added eagerness to his desire that the great opportunity he sought should not be deferred. The desire was eager in him on another ground; he trembled lest his memory should go again. Whether from the agitating presence of that fear, or from some other

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causes, he had twice felt a sort of mental dizziness, in which the inward sense or imagination seemed to be losing the distinct forms of things. Once he had attempted to enter the Palazzo Vecchio and make his way into a council-chamber where Tito was, and had failed. But now, on this evening, he felt that his occasion was come.

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CHAPTER XXXIX.

A SUPPER IN THE RUCELLAI GARDENS.

On entering the handsome pavilion, Tito's quick glance soon discerned in the selection of the guests the confirmation of his conjecture that the object of the gathering was political, though, perhaps, nothing more distinct than that strengthening of party which comes from good-fellowship. Good dishes and good wine were at that time believed to heighten the consciousness of political preferences, and in the inspired ease of after-supper talk it was supposed that people ascertained their own opinions with a clearness quite inaccessible to uninvited stomachs. The Florentines were a sober and frugal people; but wherever men have gathered wealth, Madonna della Gozzoviglia and San Buonvino have had their worshippers; and the Rucellai were among the few Florentine families who kept a great table and lived splendidly. It was not probable that on this evening there would be any attempt to apply high philosophic theories; and there could be no objection to the bust of Plato

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looking on, or even to the modest presence of the cardinal virtues in fresco on the walls.

That bust of Plato had been long used to look down on conviviality of a more transcendental sort, for it had been brought from Lorenzo's villa after his death, when the meetings of the Platonic Academy had been transferred to these gardens. Especially on every thirteenth of November, reputed anniversary of Plato's death, it had looked down from under laurel leaves on a picked company of scholars and philosophers, who met to eat and drink with moderation, and to discuss and admire, perhaps with less moderation, the doctrines of the great master:—on Pico della Mirandola, once a Quixotic young genius with long curls, astonished at his own powers and astonishing Rome with heterodox theses; afterwards a more humble student with a consuming passion for inward perfection, having come to find the universe more astonishing than his own cleverness:—on innocent, laborious Marsilio Ficino, picked out young to be reared as a Platonic philosopher, and fed on Platonism in all its stages till his mind was perhaps a little pulpy from that too exclusive diet:—on Angelo Poliziano, chief literary genius of that age, a born poet, and a scholar without dulness, whose phrases had blood in them and are alive still:—or, further back, on Leon Battista Alberti, a reverend senior when those three were young, and of a much grander type than they, a robust, universal mind, at once practical and theoretic, artist, man of science, inventor, poet:—and on many more valiant workers whose names are not registered where every

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day we turn the leaf to read them, but whose labours make a part, though an unrecognised part, of our inheritance, like the ploughing and sowing of past generations.

Bernardo Rucellai was a man to hold a distinguished place in that Academy even before he became its host and patron. He was still in the prime of life, not more than four and forty, with a somewhat haughty, cautiously dignified presence; conscious of an amazingly pure Latinity, but, says Erasmus, not to be caught speaking Latin—no word of Latin to be sheared off him by the sharpest of Teutons. He welcomed Tito with more marked favour than usual and gave him a place between Lorenzo Tornabuoni and Giannozzo Pucci, both of them accomplished young members of the Medicean party.

Of course the talk was the lightest in the world while the brass bowl filled with scented water was passing round, that the company might wash their hands, and rings flashed on white fingers under the wax-lights, and there was the pleasant fragrance of fresh white damask newly come from France. The tone of remark was a very common one in those times. Some one asked what Dante's pattern old Florentine would think if the life could come into him again under his leathern belt and bone clasp, and he could see silver forks on the table? And it was agreed on all hands that the habits of posterity would be very surprising to ancestors, if ancestors could only know them.

And while the silver forks were just dallying with

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the appetising delicacies that introduced the more serious business of the supper—such as morsels of liver, cooked to that exquisite point that they would melt in the mouth—there was time to admire the designs on the enamelled silver centres of the brass service, and to say something, as usual, about the silver dish for confetti, a masterpiece of Antonio Pollajuolo, whom patronising Popes had seduced from his native Florence to more gorgeous Rome.

"Ah, I remember," said Niccolò Ridolfi, a middle-aged man, with that negligent ease of manner which, seeming to claim nothing, is really based on the life-long consciousness of commanding rank—"I remember our Antonio getting bitter about his chiselling and enamelling of these metal things, and taking in a fury to painting, because, said he, 'the artist who puts his work into gold and silver, puts his brains into the melting-pot.'"

"And that is not unlikely to be a true foreboding of Antonio's," said Giannozzo Pucci. "If this pretty war with Pisa goes on, and the revolt only spreads a little to our other towns, it is not only our silver dishes that are likely to go; I doubt whether Antonio's silver saints round the altar of San Giovanni will not some day vanish from the eyes of the faithful to be worshipped more devoutly in the form of coin."

"The Frate is preparing us for that already," said Tornabuoni. "He is telling the people that God will not have silver crucifixes and starving stomachs; and that the church is best adorned with the gems of holiness and the fine gold of brotherly love."

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"A very useful doctrine of war-finance, as many a Condottiere has found," said Bernardo Rucellai, drily. "But politics come on after the confetti, Lorenzo, when we can drink wine enough to wash them down; they are too solid to be taken with roast and boiled."

"Yes, indeed," said Niccolò Ridolfi. "Our Luigi Pulci would have said this delicate boiled kid must be eaten with an impartial mind. I remember one day at Careggi, when Luigi was in his rattling vein, he was maintaining that nothing perverted the palate like opinion. 'Opinion,' said he, 'corrupts the saliva—that's why men took to pepper. Scepticism is the only philosophy that doesn't bring a taste in the mouth.' 'Nay,' says poor Lorenzo de' Medici, 'you must be out there, Luigi. Here is this untainted sceptic, Matteo Franco, who wants hotter sauce than any of us.' 'Because he has a strong opinion of *himself*,' flashes out Luigi, 'which is the original egg of all other opinion. *He* a sceptic? He believes in the immortality of his own verses. He is such a logician as that preaching friar who described the pavement of the bottomless pit.' Poor Luigi! his mind was like sharpest steel that can touch nothing without cutting."

"And yet a very gentle-hearted creature," said Giannozzo Pucci. "It seemed to me his talk was a mere blowing of soap-bubbles. What dithyrambs he went into about eating and drinking! and yet he was as temperate as a butterfly."

The light talk and the solid eatables were not soon at an end, for after the roast and boiled meats

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came the indispensable capon and game, and, crowning glory of a well-spread table, a peacock cooked according to the receipt of Apicius for cooking partridges, namely, with the feathers on, but not plucked afterwards, as that great authority ordered concerning his partridges; on the contrary, so disposed on the dish that it might look as much as possible like a live peacock taking its unboiled repose. Great was the skill required in that confidential servant who was the official carver, respectfully to turn the classical though insipid bird on its back, and expose the plucked breast from which he was to dispense a delicate slice to each of the honourable company, unless any one should be of so independent a mind as to decline that expensive toughness and prefer the vulgar digestibility of capon.

Hardly any one was so bold. Tito quoted Horace and dispersed his slice in small particles over his plate; Bernardo Rucellai made a learned observation about the ancient price of peacocks' eggs, but did not pretend to eat his slice; and Niccolò Ridolfi held a mouthful on his fork while he told a favourite story of Luigi Pulci's, about a man of Siena, who, wanting to give a splendid entertainment at moderate expense, bought a wild goose, cut off its beak and webbed feet, and boiled it in its feathers, to pass for a pea-hen.

In fact, very little peacock was eaten; but there was the satisfaction of sitting at a table where peacock was served up in a remarkable manner, and of knowing that such caprices were not within reach of

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any but those who supped with the very wealthiest men. And it would have been rashness to speak slightingly of peacock's flesh, or any other venerable institution, at a time when Fra Girolamo was teaching the disturbing doctrine that it was not the duty of the rich to be luxurious for the sake of the poor.

Meanwhile, in the chill obscurity that surrounded this centre of warmth, and light, and savoury odours, the lonely disowned man was walking in gradually narrowing circuits. He paused among the trees, and looked in at the windows, which made brilliant pictures against the gloom. He could hear the laughter; he could see Tito gesticulating with careless grace, and hear his voice, now alone, now mingling in the merry confusion of interlacing speeches. Baldassarre's mind was highly strung. He was preparing himself for the moment when he could win his entrance into this brilliant company; and he had a savage satisfaction in the sight of Tito's easy gaiety, which seemed to be preparing the unconscious victim for more effective torture.

But the men seated among the branching tapers and the flashing cups could know nothing of the pale fierce face that watched them from without. The light can be a curtain as well as the darkness.

And the talk went on with more eagerness as it became less disconnected and trivial. The sense of citizenship was just then strongly forced even on the most indifferent minds. What the overmastering Fra Girolamo was saying and prompting was really uppermost in the thoughts of every one at table; and before the stewed fish was removed, and while

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the favourite sweets were yet to come, his name rose to the surface of the conversation, and, in spite of Rucellai's previous prohibition, the talk again became political. At first, while the servants remained present, it was mere gossip: what had been done in the Palazzo on the first day's voting for the Great Council; how hot-tempered and domineering Francesco Valori was, as if he were to have everything his own way by right of his austere virtue; and how it was clear to everybody who heard Soderini's speeches in favour of the Great Council and also heard the Frate's sermons, that they were both kneaded in the same trough.

"My opinion is," said Niccolò Ridolfi, "that the Frate has a longer head for public matters than Soderini or any Piagnone among them: you may depend on it that Soderini is his mouthpiece more than he is Soderini's."

"No, Niccolò; there I differ from you," said Bernardo Ruccellai: "the Frate has an acute mind, and readily sees what will serve his own ends; but it is not likely that Pagolantonio Soderini, who has had long experience of affairs, and has specially studied the Venetian Council, should be much indebted to a monk for ideas on that subject. No, no; Soderini loads the cannon; though, I grant you, Fra Girolamo brings the powder and lights the match. He is master of the people, and the people are getting master of us. Ecco!"

"Well," said Lorenzo Tornabuoni, presently, when the room was clear of servants, and nothing but wine was passing round, "whether Soderini is

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indebted or not, *we* are indebted to the Frate for the general amnesty which has gone along with the scheme of the Council. We might have done without the fear of God and the reform of morals being passed by a majority of black beans; but that excellent proposition, that our Medicean heads should be allowed to remain comfortably on our shoulders, and that we should not be obliged to hand over our property in fines, has my warm approval, and it is my belief that nothing but the Frate's predominance could have procured that for us. And you may rely on it that Fra Girolamo is as firm as a rock on that point of promoting peace. I have had an interview with him."

There was a murmur of surprise and curiosity at the farther end of the table; but Bernardo Rucellai simply nodded, as if he knew what Tornabuoni had to say, and wished him to go on.

"Yes," proceeded Tornabuoni, "I have been favoured with an interview in the Frate's own cell, which, let me tell you, is not a common favour; for I have reason to believe that even Francesco Valori very seldom sees him in private. However, I think he saw me the more willingly because I was not a ready-made follower, but had to be converted. And, for my part, I see clearly enough that the only safe and wise policy for us Mediceans to pursue is to throw our strength into the scale of the Frate's party. We are not strong enough to make head on our own behalf; and if the Frate and the popular party were upset, every one who hears me knows perfectly well what other party would be uppermost

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just now: Nerli, Alberti, Pazzi, and the rest—*Arrabbiati*, as somebody christened them the other day —who, instead of giving us an amnesty, would be inclined to fly at our throats like mad dogs, and not be satisfied till they had banished half of us."

There were strong interjections of assent to this last sentence of Tornabuoni's, as he paused and looked round a moment.

"A wise dissimulation," he went on, "is the only course for moderate rational men in times of violent party feeling. I need hardly tell this company what are my real political attachments: I am not the only man here who has strong personal ties to the banished family; but, apart from any such ties, I agree with my more experienced friends, who are allowing me to speak for them in their presence, that the only lasting and peaceful state of things for Florence is the predominance of some single family interest. This theory of the Frate's, that we are to have a popular government, in which every man is to strive only for the general good, and know no party names, is a theory that may do for some isle of Cristoforo Colombo's finding, but will never do for our fine old quarrelsome Florence. A change must come before long, and with patience and caution we have every chance of determining the change in our favour. Meanwhile, the best thing we can do will be to keep the Frate's flag flying, for if any other were to be hoisted just now it would be a black flag for us."

"It's true," said Niccolò Ridolfi, in a curt decisive way. "What you say is true, Lorenzo. For my

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own part, I am too old for anybody to believe that I've changed my feathers. And there are certain of us—our old Bernardo del Nero for one—whom you would never persuade to borrow another man's shield. But we can lie still, like sleepy old dogs; and it's clear enough that barking would be of no use just now. As for this psalm-singing party, who vote for nothing but the glory of God, and want to make believe we can all love each other, and talk as if vice could be swept out with a besom by the Magnificent Eight, their day will not be a long one. After all the talk of scholars, there are but two sorts of government: one where men show their teeth at each other, and one where men show their tongues and lick the feet of the strongest. They'll get their Great Council finally voted to-morrow—that's certain enough—and they'll think they've found out a new plan of government; but as sure as there's a human skin under every lucco in the Council, their new plan will end like every other, in snarling or in licking. That's my view of things as a plain man. Not that I consider it becoming in men of family and following, who have got others depending on their constancy and on their sticking to their colours, to go a-hunting with a fine net to catch reasons in the air, like doctors of law. I say frankly that, as the head of my family, I shall be true to my old alliances; and I have never yet seen any chalk-mark on political reasons to tell me which is true and which is false. My friend Bernardo Rucellai here is a man of reasons, I know, and I have no objection to anybody's finding fine-spun reasons for

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me, so that they don't interfere with my actions as a man of family who has faith to keep with his connections."

"If that is an appeal to me, Niccolò," said Bernardo Rucellai, with a formal dignity, in amusing contrast with Ridolfi's curt and pithy ease, "I may take this opportunity of saying, that while my wishes are partly determined by long-standing personal relations, I cannot enter into any positive schemes with persons over whose actions I have no control. I myself might be content with a restoration of the old order of things; but with modifications—with important modifications. And the one point on which I wish to declare my concurrence with Lorenzo Tornabuoni is, that the best policy to be pursued by our friends is, to throw the weight of their interest into the scale of the popular party. For myself, I condescend to no dissimulation; nor do I at present see the party or the scheme that commands my full assent. In all alike there is crudity and confusion of ideas, and of all the twenty men who are my colleagues in the present crisis, there is not one with whom I do not find myself in wide disagreement."

Niccolò Ridolfi shrugged his shoulders, and left it to some one else to take up the ball. As the wine went round the talk became more and more frank and lively, and the desire of several at once to be the chief speaker, as usual caused the company to break up into small knots of two and three.

It was a result which had been foreseen by Lorenzo Tornabuoni and Giannozzo Pucci, and they were

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among the first to turn aside from the highroad of general talk and enter into a special conversation with Tito, who sat between them; gradually pushing away their seats, and turning their backs on the table and wine.

"In truth, Melema," Tornabuoni was saying at this stage, laying one hose-clad leg across the knee of the other, and caressing his ankle, "I know of no man in Florence who can serve our party better than you. You see what most of our friends are: men who can no more hide their prejudices than a dog can hide the natural tone of his bark, or else men whose political ties are so notorious, that they must always be objects of suspicion. Giannozzo here, and I, I flatter myself, are able to overcome that suspicion; we have that power of concealment and finesse, without which a rational cultivated man, instead of having any prerogative, is really at a disadvantage compared with a wild bull or a savage. But, except yourself, I know of no one else on whom we could rely for the necessary discretion."

"Yes," said Giannozzo Pucci, laying his hand on Tito's shoulder, "the fact is, Tito mio, you can help us better than if you were Ulysses himself, for I am convinced that Ulysses often made himself disagreeable. To manage men one ought to have a sharp mind in a velvet sheath. And there is not a soul in Florence who could undertake a business like this journey to Rome, for example, with the same safety that you can. There is your scholarship, which may always be a pretext for such journeys; and what is better, there is your talent, which it would be harder

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to match than your scholarship. Niccolò Macchiavelli might have done for us if he had been on our side, but hardly so well. He is too much bitten with notions, and has not your power of fascination. All the worse for him. He has lost a great chance in life, and you have got it."

"Yes," said Tornabuoni, lowering his voice in a significant manner, "you have only to play your game well, Melema, and the future belongs to you. For the Medici, you may rely upon it, will keep a foot in Rome as well as in Florence, and the time may not be far off when they will be able to make a finer career for their adherents even than they did in old days. Why shouldn't you take orders some day? There's a cardinal's hat at the end of that road, and you would not be the first Greek who has worn that ornament."

Tito laughed gaily. He was too acute not to measure Tornabuoni's exaggerated flattery, but still the flattery had a pleasant flavour.

"My joints are not so stiff yet," he said, "that I can't be induced to run without such a high prize as that. I think the income of an abbey or two held 'in commendam,' without the trouble of getting my head shaved, would satisfy me at present."

"I was not joking," said Tornabuoni, with grave suavity; "I think a scholar would always be the better off for taking orders. But we'll talk of that another time. One of the objects to be first borne in mind, is that you should win the confidence of the men who hang about San Marco; that is what Giannozzo and I shall do, but you may carry it

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farther than we can, because you are less observed. In that way you can get a thorough knowledge of their doings, and you will make a broader screen for your agency on our side. Nothing of course can be done before you start for Rome, because this bit of business between Piero de' Medici and the French nobles must be effected at once. I mean when you come back, of course; I need say no more. I believe you could make yourself the pet votary of San Marco, if you liked; but you are wise enough to know that effective dissimulation is never immoderate."

"If it were not that an adhesion to the popular side is necessary to your safety as an agent of our party, Tito mio," said Giannozzo Pucci, who was more fraternal and less patronising in his manner than Tornabuoni, "I could have wished your skill to have been employed in another way, for which it is still better fitted. But now we must look out for some other man among us who will manage to get into the confidence of our sworn enemies, the Arrabbiati; we need to know their movements more than those of the Frate's party, who are strong enough to play above-board. Still, it would have been a difficult thing for you, from your known relations with the Medici a little while back, and that sort of kinship your wife has with Bernardo del Nero. We must find a man who has no distinguished connections, and who has not yet taken any side."

Tito was pushing his hair backward automatically, as his manner was, and looking straight at Pucci with a scarcely perceptible smile on his lip.

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"No need to look out for any one else," he said, promptly. "I can manage the whole business with perfect ease. I will engage to make myself the special confidant of that thick-headed Dolfo Spini, and know his projects before he knows them himself."

Tito seldom spoke so confidently of his own powers, but he was in a state of exaltation at the sudden opening of a new path before him, where fortune seemed to have hung higher prizes than any he had thought of hitherto. Hitherto he had seen success only in the form of favour; it now flashed on him in the shape of power — of such power as is possible to talent without traditional ties, and without beliefs. Each party that thought of him as a tool might become dependent on him. His position as an alien, his indifference to the ideas or prejudices of the men amongst whom he moved, were suddenly transformed into advantages; he became newly conscious of his own adroitness in the presence of a game that he was called on to play. And all the motives which might have made Tito shrink from the triple deceit that came before him as a tempting game, had been slowly strangled in him by the successive falsities of his life.

Our lives make a moral tradition for our individual selves, as the life of mankind at large makes a moral tradition for the race; and to have once acted nobly seems a reason why we should always be noble. But Tito was feeling the effect of an opposite tradition: he had won no memories of self-conquest and perfect faithfulness from which he could have a sense of falling.

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The triple colloquy went on with growing spirit till it was interrupted by a call from the table. Probably the movement came from the listeners in the party, who were afraid lest the talkers should tire themselves. At all events it was agreed that there had been enough of gravity, and Rucellai had just ordered new flasks of Montepulciano.

"How many minstrels are there among us?" he said, when there had been a general rallying round the table. "Mèlema, I think you are the chief: Matteo will give you the lute."

"Ah, yes!" said Giannozzo Pucci, "lead the last chorus from Poliziano's "Orfeo," that you have found such an excellent measure for, and we will all fall in:—

'Ciascun segua, o Bacco, te:
Bacco, Bacco, evoè, evoè!'"

The servant put the lute into Tito's hands, and then said something in an undertone to his master. A little subdued questioning and answering went on between them, while Tito touched the lute in a preluding way to the strain of the chorus, and there was a confusion of speech and musical humming all round the table. Bernardo Rucellai had said, "Wait a moment, Melema;" but the words had been unheard by Tito, who was leaning towards Pucci, and singing low to him the phrases of the Mænad-chorus. He noticed nothing until the buzz round the table suddenly ceased, and the notes of his own voice, with its soft low-toned triumph, "Evoè, evoè!" fell in startling isolation.

It was a strange moment. Baldassarre had moved

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round the table till he was opposite Tito, and as the hum ceased there might be seen for an instant Baldassarre's fierce dark eyes bent on Tito's bright smiling unconsciousness, while the low notes of triumph dropped from his lips into the silence.

Tito looked up with a slight start, and his lips turned pale, but he seemed hardly more moved than Giannozzo Pucci, who had looked up at the same moment—or even than several others round the table; for that sallow deep-lined face with the hatred in its eyes seemed a terrible apparition across the wax-lit ease and gaiety. And Tito quickly recovered some self-command. "A mad old man—he looks like it—he *is* mad!" was the instantaneous thought that brought some courage with it; for he could conjecture no inward change in Baldassarre since they had met before. He just let his eyes fall and laid the lute on the table with apparent ease; but his fingers pinched the neck of the lute hard while he governed his head and his glance sufficiently to look with an air of quiet appeal towards Bernardo Rucellai, who said at once—

"Good man, what is your business? What is the important declaration that you have to make?"

"Messer Bernardo Rucellai, I wish you and your honourable friends to know in what sort of company you are sitting. There is a traitor among you."

There was a general movement of alarm. Every one present, except Tito, thought of political danger and not of private injury.

Baldassarre began to speak as if he were thor-

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oughly assured of what he had to say; but, in spite of his long preparation for this moment, there was the tremor of overmastering excitement in his voice. His passion shook him. He went on, but he did not say what he had meant to say. As he fixed his eyes on Tito again the passionate words were like blows—they defied premeditation.

"There is a man among you who is a scoundrel, a liar, a robber. I was a father to him. I took him from beggary when he was a child. I reared him, I cherished him, I taught him, I made him a scholar. My head has lain hard that his might have a pillow. And he left me in slavery; he sold the gems that were mine, and when I came again, he denied me."

The last words had been uttered with almost convulsed agitation, and Baldassarre paused, trembling. All glances were turned on Tito, who was now looking straight at Baldassarre. It was a moment of desperation that annihilated all feeling in him, except the determination to risk anything for the chance of escape. And he gathered confidence from the agitation by which Baldassarre was evidently shaken. He had ceased to pinch the neck of the lute, and had thrust his thumbs into his belt, while his lips had begun to assume a slight curl. He had never yet done an act of murderous cruelty even to the smallest animal that could utter a cry, but at that moment he would have been capable of treading the breath from a smiling child for the sake of his own safety.

"What does this mean, Melema?" said Bernardo Rucellai, in a tone of cautious surprise. He, as well

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as the rest of the company, felt relieved that the tenor of the accusation was not political.

"Messer Bernardo," said Tito, "I believe this man is mad. I did not recognise him the first time he encountered me in Florence, but I know now that he is the servant who years ago accompanied me and my adoptive father to Greece, and was dismissed on account of misdemeanours. His name is Jacopo di Nola. Even at that time I believe his mind was unhinged, for, without any reason, he had conceived a strange hatred towards me; and now I am convinced that he is labouring under a mania which causes him to mistake his identity. He has already attempted my life since he has been in Florence; and I am in constant danger from him. But he is an object of pity rather than of indignation. It is too certain that my father is dead. You have only my word for it; but I must leave it to your judgment how far it is probable that a man of intellect and learning would have been lurking about in dark corners for the last month with the purpose of assassinating me; or how far it is probable that, if this man were my second father, I could have any motive for denying him. That story about my being rescued from beggary is the vision of a diseased brain. But it will be a satisfaction to me at least if you will demand from him proofs of his identity, lest any malignant person should choose to make this mad impeachment a reproach to me."

Tito had felt more and more confidence as he went on; the lie was not so difficult when it was once begun; and as the words fell easily from his

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lips, they gave him a sense of power such as men feel when they have begun a muscular feat successfully. In this way he acquired boldness enough to end with a challenge for proofs.

Baldassarre, while he had been walking in the gardens and afterwards waiting in an outer room of the pavilion with the servants, had been making anew the digest of the evidence he would bring to prove his identity and Tito's baseness, recalling the description and history of his gems, and assuring himself by rapid mental glances that he could attest his learning and his travels. It might be partly owing to this nervous strain that the new shock of rage he felt as Tito's lie fell on his ears brought a strange bodily effect with it: a cold stream seemed to rush over him, and the last words of the speech seemed to be drowned by ringing chimes. Thought gave way to a dizzy horror, as if the earth were slipping away from under him. Every one in the room was looking at him as Tito ended, and saw that the eyes which had had such fierce intensity only a few minutes before had now a vague fear in them. He clutched the back of a seat, and was silent.

Hardly any evidence could have been more in favour of Tito's assertion.

"Surely I have seen this man before, somewhere," said Tornabuoni.

"Certainly you have," said Tito, readily, in a low tone. "He is the escaped prisoner who clutched me on the steps of the Duomo. I did not recognise him then; he looks now more as he used to do, ex-

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cept that he has a more unmistakable air of mad imbecility."

"I cast no doubt on your word, Melema," said Bernardo Rucellai, with cautious gravity, "but you are right to desire some positive test of the fact." Then turning to Baldassarre, he said, "If you are the person you claim to be, you can doubtless give some description of the gems which were your property. I myself was the purchaser of more than one gem from Messer Tito—the chief rings, I believe, in his collection. One of them is a fine sard, engraved with a subject from Homer. If, as you allege, you are a scholar, and the rightful owner of that ring, you can doubtless turn to the noted passage in Homer from which that subject is taken. Do you accept this test, Melema? or have you anything to allege against its validity? The Jacopo you speak of, was he a scholar?"

It was a fearful crisis for Tito. If he said "Yes," his quick mind told him that he would shake the credibility of his story: if he said "No," he risked everything on the uncertain extent of Baldassarre's imbecility. But there was no noticeable pause before he said, "No. I accept the test."

There was a dead silence while Rucellai moved towards the recess where the books were, and came back with the fine Florentine Homer in his hand. Baldassarre, when he was addressed, had turned his head towards the speaker, and Rucellai believed that he had understood him. But he chose to repeat what he had said, that there might be no mistake as to the test.

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"The ring I possess," he said, "is a fine sard, engraved with a subject from Homer. There was no other at all resembling it in Messer Tito's collection. Will you turn to the passage in Homer from which that subject is taken? Seat yourself here," he added, laying the book on the table, and pointing to his own seat while he stood beside it.

Baldassarre had so far recovered from the first confused horror produced by the sensation of rushing coldness and chiming din in the ears as to be partly aware of what was said to him: he was aware that something was being demanded from him to prove his identity, but he formed no distinct idea of the details. The sight of the book recalled the habitual longing and faint hope that he could read and understand, and he moved towards the chair immediately.

The book was open before him, and he bent his head a little towards it, while everybody watched him eagerly. He turned no leaf. His eyes wandered over the pages that lay before him, and then fixed on them a straining gaze. This lasted for two or three minutes in dead silence. Then he lifted his hands to each side of his head, and said, in a low tone of despair, "Lost, lost!"

There was something so piteous in the wandering look and the low cry, that while they confirmed the belief in his madness they raised compassion. Nay, so distinct sometimes is the working of a double consciousness within us, that Tito himself, while he triumphed in the apparent verification of his lie, wished that he had never made the lie necessary

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to himself—wished he had recognised his father on the steps — wished he had gone to seek him — wished everything had been different. But he had borrowed from the terrible usurer Falsehood, and the loan had mounted and mounted with the years, till he belonged to the usurer, body and soul.

The compassion excited in all the witnesses was not without its danger to Tito; for conjecture is constantly guided by feeling, and more than one person suddenly conceived that this man might have been a scholar and have lost his faculties. On the other hand, they had not present to their minds the motives which could have led Tito to the denial of his benefactor, and having no ill-will towards him, it would have been difficult to them to believe that he had been uttering the basest of lies. And the originally common type of Baldassarre's person, coarsened by years of hardship, told as a confirmation of Tito's lie. If Baldassarre, to begin with, could have uttered precisely the words he had premeditated, there might have been something in the form of his accusation which would have given it the stamp not only of true experience but of mental refinement. But there had been no such testimony in his impulsive agitated words: and there seemed the very opposite testimony in the rugged face and the coarse hands that trembled beside it, standing out in strong contrast in the midst of that velvet-clad, fair-handed company.

His next movement, while he was being watched in silence, told against him too. He took his hands from his head, and felt for something under his

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tunic. Every one guessed what that movement meant — guessed that there was a weapon at his side. Glances were interchanged; and Bernardo Rucellai said, in a quiet tone, touching Baldassarre's shoulder—

"My friend, this is an important business of yours. You shall have all justice. Follow me into a private room."

Baldassarre was still in that half-stunned state in which he was susceptible to any prompting, in the same way as an insect that forms no conception of what the prompting leads to. He rose from his seat, and followed Rucellai out of the room.

In two or three minutes Rucellai came back again, and said—

"He is safe under lock and key. Piero Pitti, you are one of the Magnificent Eight, what do you think of our sending Matteo to the palace for a couple of sbirri, who may escort him to the Stinche?[1] If there is any danger in him, as I think there is, he will be safe there; and we can inquire about him to-morrow."

Pitti assented, and the order was given.

"He is certainly an ill-looking fellow," said Tornabuoni. "And you say he has attempted your life already, Melema?"

And the talk turned on the various forms of madness, and the fierceness of the southern blood. If the seeds of conjecture unfavourable to Tito had been planted in the mind of any one present, they were hardly strong enough to grow without the aid

[1] The largest prison in Florence.

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of much daylight and ill-will. The common-looking, wild-eyed old man, clad in serge, might have won belief without very strong evidence, if he had accused a man who was envied and disliked. As it was, the only congruous and probable view of the case seemed to be the one that sent the unpleasant accuser safely out of sight, and left the pleasant serviceable Tito just where he was before.

The subject gradually floated away, and gave place to others, till a heavy tramp, and something like the struggling of a man who was being dragged away, were heard outside. The sounds soon died out, and the interruption seemed to make the last hour's conviviality more resolute and vigorous. Every one was willing to forget a disagreeable incident.

Tito's heart was palpitating, and the wine tasted no better to him than if it had been blood.

To-night he had paid a heavier price than ever to make himself safe. He did not like the price, and yet it was inevitable that he should be glad of the purchase.

And after all he led the chorus. He was in a state of excitement in which oppressive sensations, and the wretched consciousness of something hateful but irrevocable, were mingled with a feeling of triumph which seemed to assert itself as the feeling that would subsist and be master of the morrow.

And it *was* master. For on the morrow, as we saw, when he was about to start on his mission to Rome, he had the air of a man well satisfied with the world.

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CHAPTER XL.

AN ARRESTING VOICE.

When Romola sat down on the stone under the cypress, all things conspired to give her the sense of freedom and solitude: her escape from the accustomed walls and streets; the widening distance from her husband, who was by this time riding towards Siena, while every hour would take her farther on the opposite way; the morning stillness; the great dip of ground on the roadside making a gulf between her and the sombre calm of the mountains. For the first time in her life she felt alone in the presence of the earth and sky, with no human presence interposing and making a law for her.

Suddenly a voice close to her said—

"You are Romola de' Bardi, the wife of Tito Melema."

She knew the voice: it had vibrated through her more than once before; and because she knew it, she did not turn round or look up. She sat shaken by awe, and yet inwardly rebelling against the awe. It was one of those black-skirted monks who was

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daring to speak to her, and interfere with her privacy: that was all. And yet she was shaken, as if that destiny which men thought of as a sceptred deity had come to her, and grasped her with fingers of flesh.

"You are fleeing from Florence in disguise. I have a command from God to stop you. You are not permitted to flee."

Romola's anger at the intrusion mounted higher at these imperative words. She would not turn round to look at the speaker, whose examining gaze she resented. Sitting quite motionless, she said—

"What right have you to speak to me, or to hinder me?"

"The right of a messenger. You have put on a religious garb, and you have no religious purpose. You have sought the garb as a disguise. But you were not suffered to pass me without being discerned. It was declared to me who you were: it is declared to me that you are seeking to escape from the lot God has laid upon you. You wish your true name and your true place in life to be hidden, that you may choose for yourself a new name and a new place, and have no rule but your own will. And I have a command to call you back. My daughter, you must return to your place."

Romola's mind rose in stronger rebellion with every sentence. She was the more determined not to show any sign of submission, because the consciousness of being inwardly shaken made her dread lest she should fall into irresolution. She spoke with more irritation than before.

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"I will not return. I acknowledge no right of priests and monks to interfere with my actions. You have no power over me."

"I know—I know you have been brought up in scorn of obedience. But it is not the poor monk who claims to interfere with you: it is the truth that commands you. And you cannot escape it. Either you must obey it, and it will lead you; or you must disobey it, and it will hang on you with the weight of a chain which you will drag for ever. But you will obey it, my daughter. Your old servant will return to you with the mules; my companion is gone to fetch him; and you will go back to Florence."

She started up with anger in her eyes, and faced the speaker. It was Fra Girolamo: she knew that well enough before. She was nearly as tall as he was, and their faces were almost on a level. She had started up with defiant words ready to burst from her lips, but they fell back again without utterance. She had met Fra Girolamo's calm glance, and the impression from it was so new to her, that her anger sank ashamed as something irrelevant.

There was nothing transcendent in Savonarola's face. It was not beautiful. It was strong-featured, and owed all its refinement to habits of mind and rigid discipline of the body. The source of the impression his glance produced on Romola was the sense it conveyed to her of interest in her and care for her apart from any personal feeling. It was the first time she had encountered a gaze in which simple human fellowship expressed itself as a strongly-felt

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bond. Such a glance is half the vocation of the priest or spiritual guide of men, and Romola felt it impossible again to question his authority to speak to her. She stood silent, looking at him. And he spoke again.

"You assert your freedom proudly, my daughter. But who is so base as the debtor that thinks himself free?"

There was a sting in those words, and Romola's countenance changed as if a subtle pale flash had gone over it.

"And you are flying from your debts: the debt of a Florentine woman; the debt of a wife. You are turning your back on the lot that has been appointed for you—you are going to choose another. But can man or woman choose duties? No more than they can choose their birthplace or their father and mother. My daughter, you are fleeing from the presence of God into the wilderness."

As the anger melted from Romola's mind, it had given place to a new presentiment of the strength there might be in submission, if this man, at whom she was beginning to look with a vague reverence, had some valid law to show her. But no—it was impossible; he could not know what determined her. Yet she could not again simply refuse to be guided; she was constrained to plead; and in her new need to be reverent while she resisted, the title which she had never given him before came to her lips without forethought.

"My father, you cannot know the reasons which compel me to go. None can know them but myself.

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None can judge for me. I have been driven by great sorrow. I am resolved to go."

"I know enough, my daughter: my mind has been so far illuminated concerning you, that I know enough. You are not happy in your married life; but I am not a confessor, and I seek to know nothing that should be reserved for the seal of confession. I have a divine warrant to stop you, which does not depend on such knowledge. You were warned by a message from heaven, delivered in my presence—you were warned before marriage, when you might still have lawfully chosen to be free from the marriage-bond. But you chose the bond; and in wilfully breaking it—I speak to you as a pagan, if the holy mystery of matrimony is not sacred to you—you are breaking a pledge. Of what wrongs will you complain, my daughter, when you yourself are committing one of the greatest wrongs a woman and a citizen can be guilty of—withdrawing in secrecy and disguise from a pledge which you have given in the face of God and your fellow-men? Of what wrongs will you complain, when you yourself are breaking the simplest law that lies at the foundation of the trust which binds man to man—faithfulness to the spoken word? This, then, is the wisdom you have gained by scorning the mysteries of the Church?—not to see the bare duty of integrity, where the Church would have taught you to see, not integrity only, but religion."

The blood had rushed to Romola's face, and she shrank as if she had been stricken. "I would not have put on a disguise," she began; but she could

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not go on,—she was too much shaken by the suggestion in the Frate's words of a possible affinity between her own conduct and Tito's.

"And to break that pledge you fly from Florence: Florence, where there are the only men and women in the world to whom you owe the debt of a fellow-citizen."

"I should never have quitted Florence," said Romola, tremulously, "as long as there was any hope of my fulfilling a duty to my father there."

"And do you own no tie but that of a child to her father in the flesh? Your life has been spent in blindness, my daughter. You have lived with those who sit on a hill aloof, and look down on the life of their fellow-men. I know their vain discourse. It is of what has been in the times which they fill with their own fancied wisdom, while they scorn God's work in the present. And doubtless you were taught how there were pagan women who felt what it was to live for the Republic; yet you have never felt that you, a Florentine woman, should live for Florence. If your own people are wearing a yoke, will you slip from under it, instead of struggling with them to lighten it? There is hunger and misery in our streets, yet you say, 'I care not; I have my own sorrows; I will go away, if peradventure I can ease them.' The servants of God are struggling after a law of justice, peace, and charity, that the hundred thousand citizens among whom you were born may be governed righteously; but you think no more of this than if you were a bird, that may spread its wings and fly whither it will in search of food to its

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liking. And yet you have scorned the teaching of the Church, my daughter. As if you, a wilful wanderer, following your own blind choice, were not below the humblest Florentine woman who stretches forth her hands with her own people, and craves a blessing for them; and feels a close sisterhood with the neighbour who kneels beside her and is not of her own blood; and thinks of the mighty purpose that God has for Florence; and waits and endures because the promised work is great, and she feels herself little."

"I was not going away to ease and self-indulgence," said Romola, raising her head again, with a prompting to vindicate herself. "I was going away to hardship. I expect no joy: it is gone from my life."

"You are seeking your own will, my daughter. You are seeking some good other than the law you are bound to obey. But how will you find good? It is not a thing of choice: it is a river that flows from the foot of the Invisible Throne, and flows by the path of obedience. I say again, man cannot choose his duties. You may choose to forsake your duties, and choose not to have the sorrow they bring. But you will go forth; and what will you find, my daughter? Sorrow without duty—bitter herbs, and no bread with them."

"But if you knew," said Romola, clasping her hands and pressing them tight, as she looked pleadingly at Fra Girolamo; "if you knew what it was to me—how impossible it seemed to me to bear it."

"My daughter," he said, pointing to the cord

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round Romola's neck, "you carry something within your mantle; draw it forth, and look at it."

Romola gave a slight start, but her impulse now was to do just what Savonarola told her. Her self-doubt was grappled by a stronger will and a stronger conviction than her own. She drew forth the crucifix. Still pointing towards it, he said—

"There, my daughter, is the image of a Supreme Offering, made by Supreme Love, because the need of man was great."

He paused, and she held the crucifix trembling—trembling under a sudden impression of the wide distance between her present and her past self. What a length of road she had travelled through since she first took that crucifix from the Frate's hands! Had life as many secrets before her still as it had for her then, in her young blindness? It was a thought that helped all other subduing influences; and at the sound of Fra Girolamo's voice again, Romola, with a quick involuntary movement, pressed the crucifix against her mantle and looked at him with more submission than before.

"Conform your life to that image, my daughter; make your sorrow an offering: and when the fire of Divine charity burns within you, and you behold the need of your fellow-men by the light of that flame, you will not call your offering great. You have carried yourself proudly, as one who held herself not of common blood or of common thoughts; but you have been as one unborn to the true life of man. What! you say your love for your father no longer tells you to stay in Florence? Then, since that tie

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is snapped, you are without a law, without religion: you are no better than a beast of the field when she is robbed of her young. If the yearning of a fleshly love is gone, you are without love, without obligation. See, then, my daughter, how you are below the life of the believer who worships that image of the Supreme Offering, and feels the glow of a common life with the lost multitude for whom that offering was made, and beholds the history of the world as the history of a great redemption in which he is himself a fellow-worker, in his own place and among his own people! If you held that faith, my beloved daughter, you would not be a wanderer flying from suffering, and blindly seeking the good of a freedom which is lawlessness. You would feel that Florence was the home of your soul as well as your birthplace, because you would see the work that was given you to do there. If you forsake your place, who will fill it? You ought to be in your place now, helping in the great work by which God will purify Florence, and raise it to be the guide of the nations. What! the earth is full of iniquity—full of groans—the light is still struggling with a mighty darkness, and you say, 'I cannot bear my bonds; I will burst them asunder; I will go where no man claims me'? My daughter, every bond of your life is a debt: the right lies in the payment of that debt; it can lie nowhere else. In vain will you wander over the earth; you will be wandering for ever away from the right."

Romola was inwardly struggling with strong forces: that immense personal influence of Savonarola, which came from the energy of his emotions and beliefs;

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and her consciousness, surmounting all prejudice, that his words implied a higher law than any she had yet obeyed. But the resisting thoughts were not yet overborne.

"How, then, could Dino be right? He broke ties. He forsook his place."

"That was a special vocation. He was constrained to depart, else he could not have attained the higher life. It would have been stifled within him."

"And I too," said Romola, raising her hands to her brow, and speaking in a tone of anguish, as if she were being dragged to some torture. "Father, you may be wrong."

"Ask your conscience, my daughter. You have no vocation such as your brother had. You are a wife. You seek to break your ties in self-will and anger, not because the higher life calls upon you to renounce them. The higher life begins for us, my daughter, when we renounce our own will to bow before a Divine law. That seems hard to you. It is the portal of wisdom, and freedom, and blessedness. And the symbol of it hangs before you. That wisdom is the religion of the Cross. And you stand aloof from it: you are a pagan; you have been taught to say, 'I am as the wise men who lived before the time when the Jew of Nazareth was crucified.' And that is your wisdom! To be as the dead whose eyes are closed, and whose ear is deaf to the work of God that has been since their time. What has your dead wisdom done for you, my daughter? It has left you without a heart for the

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neighbours among whom you dwell, without care for the great work by which Florence is to be regenerated and the world made holy; it has left you without a share in the Divine life which quenches the sense of suffering Self in the ardours of an ever-growing love. And now, when the sword has pierced your soul, you say, 'I will go away; I cannot bear my sorrow.' And you think nothing of the sorrow and the wrong that are within the walls of the city where you dwell: you would leave your place empty, when it ought to be filled with your pity and your labour. If there is wickedness in the streets, your steps should shine with the light of purity; if there is a cry of anguish, you, my daughter, because you know the meaning of the cry, should be there to still it. My beloved daughter, sorrow has come to teach you a new worship: the sign of it hangs before you."

Romola's mind was still torn by conflict. She foresaw that she should obey Savonarola and go back: his words had come to her as if they were an interpretation of that revulsion from self-satisfied ease, and of that new fellowship with suffering, which had already been awakened in her. His arresting voice had brought a new condition into her life, which made it seem impossible to her that she could go on her way as if she had not heard it; yet she shrank as one who sees the path she must take, but sees, too, that the hot lava lies there. And the instinctive shrinking from a return to her husband brought doubts. She turned away her eyes from Fra Girolamo, and stood for a minute or two with her hands hanging

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clasped before her, like a statue. At last she spoke, as if the words were being wrung from her, still looking on the ground.

"My husband . . . he is not . . . my love is gone!"

"My daughter, there is the bond of a higher love. Marriage is not carnal only, made for selfish delight. See what that thought leads you to! It leads you to wander away in a false garb from all the obligations of your place and name. That would not have been, if you had learned that it is a sacramental vow, from which none but God can release you. My daughter, your life is not as a grain of sand, to be blown by the winds; it is a thing of flesh and blood, that dies if it be sundered. Your husband is not a malefactor?"

Romola started. "Heaven forbid! No; I accuse him of nothing."

"I did not suppose he was a malefactor. I meant, that if he were a malefactor, your place would be in the prison beside him. My daughter, if the cross comes to you as a wife, you must carry it as a wife. You may say, 'I will forsake my husband,' but you cannot cease to be a wife."

"Yet if—oh, how could I bear——" Romola had involuntarily begun to say something which she sought to banish from her mind again.

"Make your marriage-sorrows an offering too, my daughter: an offering to the great work by which sin and sorrow are being made to cease. The end is sure, and is already beginning. Here in Florence it is beginning, and the eyes of faith behold it. And it may be our blessedness to die for it: to die daily by

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the crucifixion of our selfish will—to die at last by laying our bodies on the altar. My daughter, you are a child of Florence; fulfil the duties of that great inheritance. Live for Florence—for your own people, whom God is preparing to bless the earth. Bear the anguish and the smart. The iron is sharp —I know, I know—it rends the tender flesh. The draught is bitterness on the lips. But there is rapture in the cup—there is the vision which makes all life below it dross for ever. Come, my daughter, come back to your place!"

While Savonarola spoke with growing intensity, his arms tightly folded before him still, as they had been from the first, but his face alight as from an inward flame, Romola felt herself surrounded and possessed by the glow of his passionate faith. The chill doubts all melted away; she was subdued by the sense of something unspeakably great to which she was being called by a strong being who roused a new strength within herself. In a voice that was like a low, prayerful cry, she said—

"Father, I will be guided. Teach me! I will go back."

Almost unconsciously she sank on her knees. Savonarola stretched out his hands over her; but feeling would no longer pass through the channel of speech, and he was silent.

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CHAPTER XLI.

COMING BACK.

"Rise, my daughter," said Fra Girolamo at last, "Your servant is waiting not far off with the mules. It is time that I should go onward to Florence."

Romola arose from her knees. That silent attitude had been a sort of sacrament to her, confirming the state of yearning passivity on which she had newly entered. By the one act of renouncing her resolve to quit her husband, her will seemed so utterly bruised that she felt the need of direction even in small things. She lifted up the edge of her cowl, and saw Maso and the second Dominican standing with their backs towards her on the edge of the hill about ten yards from her; but she looked at Savonarola again without speaking, as if the order to Maso to turn back must come from him and not from her.

"I will go and call them," he said, answering her glance of appeal; "and I will recommend you, my daughter, to the Brother who is with me. You desire to put yourself under guidance, and to learn that wisdom which has been hitherto as foolishness

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to you. A chief gate of that wisdom is the sacrament of confession. You will need a confessor, my daughter, and I desire to put you under the care of Fra Salvestro, one of the brethren of San Marco, in whom I most confide."

"I would rather have no guidance but yours, father," said Romola, looking anxious.

"My daughter, I do not act as a confessor. The vocation I have withdraws me from offices that would force me into frequent contact with the laity, and interfere with my special duties."

"Then shall I not be able to speak to you in private? if I waver, if——" Romola broke off from rising agitation. She felt a sudden alarm lest her new strength in renunciation should vanish if the immediate personal influence of Savonarola vanished.

"My daughter, if your soul has need of the word in private from my lips, you will let me know it through Fra Salvestro, and I will see you in the sacristy or in the choir of San Marco. And I will not cease to watch over you. I will instruct my brother concerning you, that he may guide you into that path of labour for the suffering and the hungry to which you are called as a daughter of Florence in these times of hard need. I desire to behold you among the feebler and more ignorant sisters as the apple-tree among the trees of the forest, so that your fairness and all natural gifts may be but as a lamp through which the Divine light shines the more purely. I will go now and call your servant."

When Maso had been sent a little way in advance, Fra Salvestro came forward, and Savonarola led

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Romola towards him. She had beforehand felt an inward shrinking from a new guide who was a total stranger to her: but to have resisted Savonarola's advice would have been to assume an attitude of independence at a moment when all her strength must be drawn from the renunciation of independence. And the whole bent of her mind now was towards doing what was painful rather than what was easy. She bowed reverently to Fra Salvestro before looking directly at him; but when she raised her head and saw him fully, her reluctance became a palpitating doubt. There are men whose presence infuses trust and reverence; there are others to whom we have need to carry our trust and reverence ready-made; and that difference flashed on Romola as she ceased to have Savonarola before her, and saw in his stead Fra Salvestro Maruffi. It was not that there was anything manifestly repulsive in Fra Salvestro's face and manner, any air of hypocrisy, any tinge of coarseness; his face was handsomer than Fra Girolamo's, his person a little taller. He was the long-accepted confessor of many among the chief personages in Florence, and had therefore had large experience as a spiritual director. But his face had the vacillating expression of a mind unable to concentrate itself strongly in the channel of one great emotion or belief—an expression which is fatal to influence over an ardent nature like Romola's. Such an expression is not the stamp of insincerity; it is the stamp simply of a shallow soul, which will often be found sincerely striving to fill a high vocation, sincerely composing its countenance to the utterance

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of sublime formulas, but finding the muscles twitch or relax in spite of belief, as prose insists on coming instead of poetry to the man who has not the divine frenzy. Fra Salvestro had a peculiar liability to visions, dependent apparently on a constitution given to somnambulism. Savonarola believed in the supernatural character of these visions, while Fra Salvestro himself had originally resisted such an interpretation of them, and had even rebuked Savonarola for his prophetic preaching: another proof, if one were wanted, that the relative greatness of men is not to be gauged by their tendency to disbelieve the superstitions of their age. For of these two there can be no question which was the great man and which the small.

The difference between them was measured very accurately by the change in Romola's feeling as Fra Salvestro began to address her in words of exhortation and encouragement. After her first angry resistance of Savonarola had passed away, she had lost all remembrance of the old dread lest any influence should drag her within the circle of fanaticism and sour monkish piety. But now again, the chill breath of that dread stole over her. It could have no decisive effect against the impetus her mind had just received; it was only like the closing of the grey clouds over the sunrise, which made her returning path monotonous and sombre.

And perhaps of all sombre paths that on which we go back after treading it with a strong resolution is the one that most severely tests the fervour of renunciation. As they re-entered the city gates the

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light snow-flakes fell about them; and as the grey sister walked hastily homeward from the Piazza di San Marco, and trod the bridge again, and turned in at the large door in the Via de' Bardi, her footsteps were marked darkly on the thin carpet of snow, and her cowl fell laden and damp about her face.

She went up to her room, threw off her serge, destroyed the parting letters, replaced all her precious trifles, unbound her hair, and put on her usual black dress. Instead of taking a long exciting journey, she was to sit down in her usual place. The snow fell against the windows, and she was alone.

She felt the dreariness, yet her courage was high, like that of a seeker who has come on new signs of gold. She was going to thread life by a fresh clue. She had thrown all the energy of her will into renunciation. The empty tabernacle remained locked, and she placed Dino's crucifix outside it.

Nothing broke the outward monotony of her solitary home, till the night came like a white ghost at the windows. Yet it was the most memorable Christmas-eve in her life to Romola, this of 1494.

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BOOK III.

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CHAPTER XLII.

ROMOLA IN HER PLACE.

It was the thirtieth of October 1496. The sky that morning was clear enough, and there was a pleasant autumnal breeze. But the Florentines just then thought very little about the land breezes: they were thinking of the gales at sea, which seemed to be uniting with all other powers to disprove the Frate's declaration that Heaven took special care of Florence.

For those terrible gales had driven away from the coast of Leghorn certain ships from Marseilles, freighted with soldiery and corn; and Florence was in the direst need, first of food, and secondly of fighting men. Pale Famine was in her streets, and her territory was threatened on all its borders.

For the French king, that new Charlemagne, who had entered Italy in anticipatory triumph, and had conquered Naples without the least trouble, had gone away again fifteen months ago, and was even, it was feared, in his grief for the loss of a new-born son, losing the languid intention of coming back

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again to redress grievances and set the Church in order. A league had been formed against him—a Holy League, with Pope Borgia at its head—to "drive out the barbarians," who still garrisoned the fortress of Naples. That had a patriotic sound; but, looked at more closely, the Holy League seemed very much like an agreement among certain wolves to drive away all other wolves, and then to see which among themselves could snatch the largest share of the prey. And there was a general disposition to regard Florence not as a fellow-wolf, but rather as a desirable carcass. Florence, therefore, of all the chief Italian States, had alone declined to join the League, adhering still to the French alliance.

She had declined at her peril. At this moment Pisa, still fighting savagely for liberty, was being encouraged not only by strong forces from Venice and Milan, but by the presence of the German Emperor Maximilian, who had been invited by the League, and was joining the Pisans with such troops as he had in the attempt to get possession of Leghorn, while the coast was invested by Venetian and Genoese ships. And if Leghorn should fall into the hands of the enemy, woe to Florence! For if that one outlet towards the sea were closed, hedged in as she was on the land by the bitter ill-will of the Pope and the jealousy of smaller States, how could succours reach her?

The government of Florence had shown a great heart in this urgent need, meeting losses and defeats with vigorous effort, raising fresh money, raising fresh soldiers, but not neglecting the good old

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method of Italian defence—conciliatory embassies. And while the scarcity of food was every day becoming greater, they had resolved, in opposition to old precedent, not to shut out the starving country people, and the mendicants driven from the gates of other cities, who came flocking to Florence like birds from a land of snow.

These acts of a government in which the disciples of Savonarola made the strongest element were not allowed to pass without criticism. The disaffected were plentiful, and they saw clearly that the government took the worst course for the public welfare. Florence ought to join the League and make common cause with the other great Italian States, instead of drawing down their hostility by a futile adherence to a foreign ally. Florence ought to take care of her own citizens, instead of opening her gates to famine and pestilence in the shape of starving contadini and alien mendicants.

Every day the distress became sharper: every day the murmurs became louder. And, to crown the difficulties of the government, for a month and more—in obedience to a mandate from Rome—Fra Girolamo had ceased to preach. But on the arrival of the terrible news that the ships from Marseilles had been driven back, and that no corn was coming, the need for the voice that could infuse faith and patience into the people became too imperative to be resisted. In defiance of the Papal mandate the Signoria requested Savonarola to preach. And two days ago he had mounted again the pulpit of the Duomo, and had told the people only to wait and

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be steadfast and the divine help would certainly come.

It was a bold sermon: he consented to have his frock stripped off him if, when Florence persevered in fulfilling the duties of piety and citizenship, God did not come to her rescue.

Yet at present, on this morning of the thirtieth, there were no signs of rescue. Perhaps if the precious Tabernacle of the Madonna dell' Impruneta were brought into Florence and carried in devout procession to the Duomo, that Mother, rich in sorrows and therefore in mercy, would plead for the suffering city? For a century and a half there were records how the Florentines, suffering from drought, or flood, or famine, or pestilence, or the threat of wars, had fetched the potent image within their walls, and had found deliverance. And grateful honour had been done to her and her ancient church of L'Impruneta; the high house of Buondelmonti, patrons of the church, had to guard her hidden image with bare sword; wealth had been poured out for prayers at her shrine, for chantings, and chapels, and ever-burning lights; and lands had been added, till there was much quarrelling for the privilege of serving her. The Florentines were deeply convinced of her graciousness to them, so that the sight of her tabernacle within their walls was like the parting of the cloud, and the proverb ran, that the Florentines had a Madonna who would do what they pleased.

When were they in more need of her pleading pity than now? And already, the evening before, the tabernacle containing the miraculous hidden image

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had been brought with high and reverend escort from L'Impruneta, the privileged spot six miles beyond the gate of San Piero that looks towards Rome, and had been deposited in the church of San Gaggio, outside the gate, whence it was to be fetched in solemn procession by all the fraternities, trades, and authorities of Florence.

But the Pitying Mother had not yet entered within the walls, and the morning arose on unchanged misery and despondency. Pestilence was hovering in the track of famine. Not only the hospitals were full, but the courtyards of private houses had been turned into refuges and infirmaries; and still there was unsheltered want. And early this morning, as usual, members of the various fraternities who made it part of their duty to bury the unfriended dead, were bearing away the corpses that had sunk by the wayside. As usual, sweet womanly forms, with the refined air and carriage of the well-born, but in the plainest garb, were moving about the streets on their daily errands of tending the sick and relieving the hungry.

One of these forms was easily distinguishable as Romola de' Bardi. Clad in the simplest garment of black serge, with a plain piece of black drapery drawn over her head, so as to hide all her hair, except the bands of gold that rippled apart on her brow, she was advancing from the Ponte Vecchio towards the Por' Santa Maria—the street in a direct line with the bridge—when she found her way obstructed by the pausing of a bier, which was being carried by members of the company of San Jacopo

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del Popolo, in search for the unburied dead. The brethren at the head of the bier were stooping to examine something, while a group of idle workmen, with features paled and sharpened by hunger, were clustering around and all talking at once.

"He's dead, I tell you! Messer Domeneddio has loved him well enough to take him."

"Ah, and it would be well for us all if we could have our legs stretched out and go with our heads two or three *bracci* foremost! It's ill standing upright with hunger to prop you."

"Well, well, he's an old fellow. Death has got a poor bargain. Life's had the best of him."

"And no Florentine, ten to one! A beggar turned out of Siena. San Giovanni defend us! They've no need of soldiers to fight us. They send us an army of starving men."

"No, no! This man is one of the prisoners turned out of the Stinche. I know by the grey patch where the prison badge was."

"Keep quiet! Lend a hand! Don't you see the brethren are going to lift him on the bier?"

"It's likely he's alive enough if he could only look it. The soul may be inside him if it had only a drop of *vernaccia* to warm it."

"In truth, I think he is not dead," said one of the brethren, when they had lifted him on the bier. "He has perhaps only sunk down for want of food."

"Let me try to give him some wine," said Romola, coming forward. She loosened the small flask which she carried at her belt, and, leaning towards the prostrate body, with a deft hand she applied a small

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ivory implement between the teeth, and poured into the mouth a few drops of wine. The stimulus acted: the wine was evidently swallowed. She poured more, till the head was moved a little towards her, and the eyes of the old man opened full upon her with the vague look of returning consciousness.

Then for the first time a sense of complete recognition came over Romola. Those wild dark eyes opening in the sallow deep-lined face, with the white beard, which was now long again, were like an unmistakable signature to a remembered handwriting. The light of two summers had not made that image any fainter in Romola's memory: the image of the escaped prisoner, whom she had seen in the Duomo the day when Tito first wore the armour—at whose grasp Tito was paled with terror in the strange sketch she had seen in Piero's studio. A wretched tremor and palpitation seized her. Now at last, perhaps, she was going to know some secret which might be more bitter than all that had gone before. She felt an impulse to dart away as from a sight of horror; and again, a more imperious need to keep close by the side of this old man whom, the divination of keen feeling told her, her husband had injured. In the very instant of this conflict she still leaned towards him and kept her right hand ready to administer more wine, while her left was passed under his neck. Her hands trembled, but their habit of soothing helpfulness would have served to guide them without the direction of her thought.

Baldassarre was looking at *her* for the first time.

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The close seclusion in which Romola's trouble had kept her in the weeks preceding her flight and his arrest, had denied him the opportunity he had sought of seeing the Wife who lived in the Via de' Bardi: and at this moment the descriptions he had heard of the fair golden-haired woman were all gone, like yesterday's waves.

"Will it not be well to carry him to the steps of San Stefano?" said Romola. "We shall cease then to stop up the street, and you can go on your way with your bier."

They had only to move onward for about thirty yards before reaching the steps of San Stefano, and by this time Baldassarre was able himself to make some efforts towards getting off the bier, and propping himself on the steps against the church doorway. The charitable brethren passed on, but the group of interested spectators, who had nothing to do and much to say, had considerably increased. The feeling towards the old man was not so entirely friendly now it was quite certain that he was alive, but the respect inspired by Romola's presence caused the passing remarks to be made in a rather more subdued tone than before.

"Ah, they gave him his morsel every day in the Stinche—that's why he can't do so well without it. You and I, Cecco, know better what it is to go to bed fasting."

"*Gnaffè!* that's why the Magnificent Eight have turned out some of the prisoners, that they may shelter honest people instead. But if every thief is to be brought to life with good wine and wheaten

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bread, we Ciompi had better go and fill ourselves in Arno while the water's plenty."

Romola had seated herself on the steps by Baldassarre, and was saying, "Can you eat a little bread now? perhaps by-and-by you will be able, if I leave it with you. I must go on, because I have promised to be at the hospital. But I will come back if you will wait here, and then I will take you to some shelter. Do you understand? Will you wait? I will come back."

He looked dreamily at her, and repeated her words, "come back." It was no wonder that his mind was enfeebled by his bodily exhaustion, but she hoped that he apprehended her meaning. She opened her basket, which was filled with pieces of soft bread, and put one of the pieces into his hand.

"Do you keep your bread for those that can't swallow, madonna?" said a rough-looking fellow, in a red night-cap, who had elbowed his way into the inmost circle of spectators—a circle that was pressing rather closely on Romola.

"If anybody isn't hungry," said another, "I say, let him alone. He's better off than people who've got craving stomachs and no breakfast."

"Yes, indeed; if a man's a mind to die, it's a time to encourage him, instead of making him come back to life against his will. Dead men want no trencher."

"Oh, you don't understand the Frate's charity," said a young man in an excellent cloth tunic, whose face showed no signs of want. "The Frate has been preaching to the birds, like Saint Anthony, and he's

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been telling the hawks they were made to feed the sparrows, as every good Florentine citizen was made to feed six starving beggarmen from Arezzo or Bologna. Madonna, there, is a pious Piagnone: she's not going to throw away her good bread on honest citizens who've got all the Frate's prophecies to swallow."

"Come, madonna," said he of the red cap, "the old thief doesn't eat the bread, you see: you'd better try *us*. We fast so much, we're half saints already."

The circle had narrowed till the coarse men—most of them gaunt from privation—had left hardly any margin round Romola. She had been taking from her basket a small horn-cup, into which she put the piece of bread and just moistened it with wine; and hitherto she had not appeared to heed them. But now she rose to her feet, and looked round at them. Instinctively the men who were nearest to her pushed backward a little, as if their rude nearness were the fault of those behind. Romola held out the basket of bread to the man in the night-cap, looking at him without any reproach in her glance, as she said—

"Hunger is hard to bear, I know, and you have the power to take this bread if you will. It was saved for sick women and children. You are strong men; but if you do not choose to suffer because you are strong, you have the power to take everything from the weak. You can take the bread from this basket; but I shall watch by this old man; I shall resist your taking the bread from *him*."

For a few moments there was perfect silence,

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while Romola looked at the faces before her, and held out the basket of bread. Her own pale face had the slightly pinched look and the deepening of the eye-socket which indicate unusual fasting in the habitually temperate, and the large direct gaze of her hazel eyes was all the more impressive.

The man in the night-cap looked rather silly, and backed, thrusting his elbow into his neighbour's ribs with an air of moral rebuke. The backing was general, every one wishing to imply that he had been pushed forward against his will; and the young man in the fine cloth tunic had disappeared.

But at this moment the armed servitors of the Signoria, who had begun to patrol the line of streets through which the procession was to pass, came up to disperse the group which was obstructing the narrow street. The man addressed as Cecco retreated from a threatening mace up the church steps, and said to Romola, in a respectful tone—

"Madonna, if you want to go on your errands, I'll take care of the old man."

Cecco was a wild-looking figure: a very ragged tunic, made shaggy and variegated by cloth-dust and clinging fragments of wool, gave relief to a pair of bare bony arms and a long sinewy neck; his square jaw shaded by a bristly black beard, his bridgeless nose and low forehead, made his face look as if it had been crushed down for purposes of packing, and a narrow piece of red rag tied over his ears seemed to assist in the compression. Romola looked at him with some hesitation.

"Don't distrust me, madonna," said Cecco, who

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understood her look perfectly; "I am not so pretty as you, but I've got an old mother who eats my porridge for me. What! there's a heart inside me, and I've bought a candle for the most Holy Virgin before now. Besides, see there, the old fellow is eating his sop. He's hale enough: he'll be on his legs as well as the best of us by-and-by."

"Thank you for offering to take care of him, friend," said Romola, rather penitent for her doubting glance. Then leaning to Baldassarre, she said, "Pray wait for me till I come again."

He assented with a slight movement of the head and hand, and Romola went on her way towards the hospital of San Matteo, in the Piazza di San Marco.

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CHAPTER XLIII.

THE UNSEEN MADONNA.

In returning from the hospital, more than an hour later, Romola took a different road, making a wider circuit towards the river, which she reached at some distance from the Ponte Vecchio. She turned her steps towards that bridge, intending to hasten to San Stefano in search of Baldassarre. She dreaded to know more about him, yet she felt as if, in forsaking him, she would be forsaking some near claim upon her.

But when she approached the meeting of the roads where the Por' Santa Maria would be on her right hand and the Ponte Vecchio on her left, she found herself involved in a crowd who suddenly fell on their knees; and she immediately knelt with them. The Cross was passing—the Great Cross of the Duomo—which headed the procession. Romola was later than she had expected to be, and now she must wait till the procession had passed. As she rose from her knees, when the Cross had disappeared, the return to a standing posture, with noth-

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ing to do but gaze, made her more conscious of her fatigue than she had been while she had been walking and occupied. A shopkeeper by her side said,—

"Madonna Romola, you will be weary of standing: Gian Fantoni will be glad to give you a seat in his house. Here is his door close at hand. Let me open it for you. What! he loves God and the Frate as we do. His house is yours."

Romola was accustomed now to be addressed in this fraternal way by ordinary citizens, whose faces were familiar to her from her having seen them constantly in the Duomo. The idea of home had come to be identified for her less with the house in the Via de' Bardi, where she sat in frequent loneliness, than with the towered circuit of Florence, where there was hardly a turn of the streets at which she was not greeted with looks of appeal or of friendliness. She was glad enough to pass through the open door on her right hand and be led by the fraternal hosevender to an upstairs-window, where a stout woman with three children, all in the plain garb of Piagnoni, made a place for her with much reverence above the bright hanging draperies. From this corner station she could see, not only the procession pouring in solemn slowness between the lines of houses on the Ponte Vecchio, but also the river and the Lung' Arno on towards the bridge of the Santa Trinità.

In sadness and in stillness came the slow procession. Not even a wailing chant broke the silent appeal for mercy: there was only the tramp of footsteps, and the faint sweep of woollen garments. They were young footsteps that were passing when

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Romola first looked from the window—a long train of the Florentine youth, bearing high in the midst of them the white image of the youthful Jesus, with a golden glory above his head, standing by the tall cross where the thorns and the nails lay ready.

After that train of fresh beardless faces came the mysterious-looking Companies of Discipline, bound by secret rules to self-chastisement, and devout praise, and special acts of piety; all wearing a garb which concealed the whole head and face except the eyes. Every one knew that these mysterious forms were Florentine citizens of various ranks, who might be seen at ordinary times going about the business of the shop, the counting-house, or the State; but no member now was discernible as son, husband, or father. They had dropped their personality, and walked as symbols of a common vow. Each company had its colour and its badge, but the garb of all was a complete shroud, and left no expression but that of fellowship.

In comparison with them, the multitude of monks seemed to be strongly distinguished individuals, in spite of the common tonsure and the common frock. First came a white stream of reformed Benedictines; and then a much longer stream of the Frati Minori, or Franciscans, in that age all clad in grey, with the knotted cord round their waists, and some of them with the *zoccoli*, or wooden sandals, below their bare feet;—perhaps the most numerous order in Florence, owning many zealous members who loved mankind and hated the Dominicans. And after the grey came the black of the Augustinians of San Spirito,

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with more cultured human faces above it—men who had inherited the library of Boccaccio, and had made the most learned company in Florence when learning was rarer; then the white over dark of the Carmelites; and then again the unmixed black of the Servites, that famous Florentine order founded by seven merchants who forsook their gains to adore the Divine Mother.

And now the hearts of all on-lookers began to beat a little faster, either with hatred or with love, for there was a stream of black and white coming over the bridge—of black mantles over white scapularies; and every one knew that the Dominicans were coming. Those of Fiesole passed first. One black mantle parted by white after another, one tonsured head after another, and still expectation was suspended. They were very coarse mantles, all of them, and many were threadbare, if not ragged; for the Prior of San Marco had reduced the fraternities under his rule to the strictest poverty and discipline. But in the long line of black and white there was at last singled out a mantle only a little more worn than the rest, with a tonsured head above it which might not have appeared supremely remarkable to a stranger who had not seen it on bronze medals, with the sword of God as its obverse; or surrounded by an armed guard on the way to the Duomo; or transfigured by the inward flame of the orator as it looked round on a rapt multitude.

As the approach of Savonarola was discerned, none dared conspicuously to break the stillness by

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a sound which would rise above the solemn tramp of footsteps and the faint sweep of garments; nevertheless his ear, as well as other ears, caught a mingled sound of slow hissing that longed to be curses, and murmurs that longed to be blessings. Perhaps it was the sense that the hissing predominated which made two or three of his disciples in the foreground of the crowd, at the meeting of the roads, fall on their knees as if something divine were passing. The movement of silent homage spread: it went along the sides of the streets like a subtle shock, leaving some unmoved, while it made the most bend the knee and bow the head. But the hatred, too, gathered a more intense expression; and as Savonarola passed up the Por' Santa Maria, Romola could see that some one at an upper window spat upon him.

Monks again — Frati Umiliati, or Humbled Brethren, from Ognissanti, with a glorious tradition of being the earliest workers in the wool-trade; and again more monks — Vallombrosan and other varieties of Benedictines, reminding the instructed eye by niceties of form and colour that in ages of abuse, long ago, reformers had arisen who had marked a change of spirit by a change of garb; till at last the shaven crowns were at an end, and there came the train of untonsured secular priests.

Then followed the twenty-one incorporated Arts of Florence in long array, with their banners floating above them in proud declaration that the bearers had their distinct functions, from the bakers of

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bread to the judges and notaries. And then all the secondary officers of State, beginning with the less and going on to the greater, till the line of secularities was broken by the Canons of the Duomo, carrying a sacred relic—the very head, enclosed in silver, of San Zenobio, immortal bishop of Florence, whose virtues were held to have saved the city perhaps a thousand years before.

Here was the nucleus of the procession. Behind the relic came the archbishop in gorgeous cope, with canopy held above him; and after him the mysterious hidden Image — hidden first by rich curtains of brocade enclosing an outer painted tabernacle, but within this, by the more ancient tabernacle which had never been opened in the memory of living men, or the fathers of living men. In that inner shrine was the image of the Pitying Mother, found ages ago in the soil of L'Impruneta, uttering a cry as the spade struck it. Hitherto the unseen Image had hardly ever been carried to the Duomo without having rich gifts borne before it. There was no reciting the list of precious offerings made by emulous men and communities, especially of veils and curtains and mantles. But the richest of all these, it was said, had been given by a poor abbess and her nuns, who, having no money to buy materials, wove a mantle of gold brocade with their prayers, embroidered it and adorned it with their prayers, and, finally, saw their work presented to the Blessed Virgin in the great Piazza by two beautiful youths who spread out white wings and vanished in the blue.

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But to-day there were no gifts carried before the tabernacle: no donations were to be given to-day except to the poor. That had been the advice of Fra Girolamo, whose preaching never insisted on gifts to the invisible powers, but only on help to visible need; and altars had been raised at various points in front of the churches, on which the oblations for the poor were deposited. Not even a torch was carried. Surely the hidden Mother cared less for torches and brocade than for the wail of the hungry people. Florence was in extremity: she had done her utmost, and could only wait for something divine that was not in her own power.

The Frate in the torn mantle had said that help would certainly come, and many of the faint-hearted were clinging more to their faith in the Frate's word, than to their faith in the virtues of the unseen Image. But there were not a few of the fierce-hearted who thought with secret rejoicing that the Frate's word might be proved false.

Slowly the tabernacle moved forward, and knees were bent. There was profound stillness; for the train of priests and chaplains from L'Impruneta stirred no passion in the on-lookers. The procession was about to close with the Priors and the Gonfaloniere: the long train of companies and symbols, which have their silent music and stir the mind as a chorus stirs it, was passing out of sight, and now a faint yearning hope was all that struggled with the accustomed despondency.

Romola, whose heart had been swelling, half with foreboding, half with that enthusiasm of fellowship

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which the life of the last two years had made as habitual to her as the consciousness of costume to a vain and idle woman, gave a deep sigh, as at the end of some long mental tension, and remained on her knees for very languor; when suddenly there flashed from between the houses on to the distant bridge something bright-coloured. In the instant, Romola started up and stretched out her arms, leaning from the window, while the black drapery fell from her head, and the golden gleam of her hair and the flush in her face seemed the effect of one illumination. A shout arose in the same instant; the last troops of the procession paused, and all faces were turned towards the distant bridge.

But the bridge was passed now: the horseman was pressing at full gallop along by the Arno; the sides of his bay horse, just streaked with foam, looked all white from swiftness; his cap was flying loose by his red becchetto, and he waved an olive branch in his hand. It was a messenger—a messenger of good tidings! The blessed olive branch spoke afar off. But the impatient people could not wait. They rushed to meet the on-comer, and seized his horse's rein, pushing and trampling.

And now Romola could see that the horseman was her husband, who had been sent to Pisa a few days before on a private embassy. The recognition brought no new flash of joy into her eyes. She had checked her first impulsive attitude of expectation; but her governing anxiety was still to know what news of relief had come for Florence.

"Good news!" "Best news!" "News to be

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paid with hose (*novelle da calze*)!" were the vague answers with which Tito met the importunities of the crowd, until he had succeeded in pushing on his horse to the spot at the meeting of the ways where the Gonfaloniere and the Priors were awaiting him. There he paused, and, bowing low, said—

"Magnificent Signori! I have to deliver to you the joyful news that the galleys from France, laden with corn and men, have arrived safely in the port of Leghorn, by favour of a strong wind, which kept the enemy's fleet at a distance."

The words had no sooner left Tito's lips than they seemed to vibrate up the streets. A great shout rang through the air, and rushed along the river; and then another, and another; and the shouts were heard spreading along the line of the procession towards the Duomo; and then there were fainter answering shouts, like the intermediate plash of distant waves in a great lake whose waters obey one impulse.

For some minutes there was no attempt to speak further: the Signoria themselves lifted up their caps, and stood bare-headed in the presence of a rescue which had come from outside the limit of their own power—from that region of trust and resignation which has been in all ages called divine.

At last, as the signal was given to move forward, Tito said, with a smile—

"I ought to say, that any hose to be bestowed by the Magnificent Signoria in reward of these tidings are due, not to me, but to another man who had ridden hard to bring them, and would have been

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here in my place if his horse had not broken down just before he reached Signa. Meo di Sasso will doubtless be here in an hour or two, and may all the more justly claim the glory of the messenger, because he has had the chief labour and has lost the chief delight."

It was a graceful way of putting a necessary statement, and after a word of reply from the *Proposto*, or spokesman of the Signoria, this dignified extremity of the procession passed on, and Tito turned his horse's head to follow in its train, while the great bell of the Palazzo Vecchio was already beginning to swing, and give a louder voice to the people's joy.

In that moment, when Tito's attention had ceased to be imperatively directed, it might have been expected that he would look round and recognise Romola; but he was apparently engaged with his cap, which, now the eager people were leading his horse, he was able to seize and place on his head, while his right hand was still encumbered by the olive branch. He had a becoming air of lassitude after his exertions; and Romola, instead of making any effort to be recognised by him, threw her black drapery over her head again, and remained perfectly quiet. Yet she felt almost sure that Tito had seen her; he had the power of seeing everything without seeming to see it.

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CHAPTER XLIV.

THE VISIBLE MADONNA.

THE crowd had no sooner passed onward than Romola descended to the street, and hastened to the steps of San Stefano. Cecco had been attracted with the rest towards the Piazza, and she found Baldassarre standing alone against the church door, with the horn-cup in his hand, waiting for her. There was a striking change in him: the blank, dreamy glance of a half-returned consciousness had given place to a fierceness which, as she advanced and spoke to him, flashed upon her as if she had been its object. It was the glance of caged fury that sees its prey passing safe beyond the bars.

Romola started as the glance was turned on her, but her immediate thought was that he had seen Tito. And as she felt the look of hatred grating on her, something like a hope arose that this man might be the criminal, and that her husband might not have been guilty towards him. If she could learn that now, by bringing Tito face to face with him, and have her mind set at rest!

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"If you will come with me," she said, "I can give you shelter and food until you are quite rested and strong. Will you come?"

"Yes," said Baldassarre, "I shall be glad to get my strength. I want to get my strength," he repeated, as if he were muttering to himself, rather than speaking to her.

"Come!" she said, inviting him to walk by her side, and taking the way by the Arno towards the Ponte Rubaconte as the more private road.

"I think you are not a Florentine," she said, presently, as they turned on to the bridge.

He looked round at her without speaking. His suspicious caution was more strongly upon him than usual, just now that the fog of confusion and oblivion was made denser by bodily feebleness. But she was looking at him too, and there was something in her gentle eyes which at last compelled him to answer her. But he answered cautiously—

"No, I am no Florentine; I am a lonely man."

She observed his reluctance to speak to her, and dared not question him further, lest he should desire to quit her. As she glanced at him from time to time, her mind was busy with thoughts which quenched the faint hope that there was nothing painful to be revealed about her husband. If this old man had been in the wrong, where was the cause for dread and secrecy?

They walked on in silence till they reached the entrance into the Via de' Bardi, and Romola noticed that he turned and looked at her with a sudden movement as if some shock had passed through him.

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A few moments after, she paused at the half-open door of the court and turned towards him.

"Ah!" he said, not waiting for her to speak, "you are his wife."

"Whose wife?" said Romola.

It would have been impossible for Baldassarre to recall any name at that moment. The very force with which the image of Tito pressed upon him seemed to expel any verbal sign. He made no answer, but looked at her with strange fixedness.

She opened the door wide and showed the court covered with straw, on which lay four or five sick people, while some little children crawled or sat on it at their ease—tiny pale creatures, biting straws and gurgling.

"If you will come in," said Romola, tremulously, "I will find you a comfortable place, and bring you some more food."

"No, I will not come in," said Baldassarre. But he stood still, arrested by the burden of impressions under which his mind was too confused to choose a course.

"Can I do nothing for you?" said Romola. "Let me give you some money that you may buy food. It will be more plentiful soon."

She had put her hand into her scarsella as she spoke, and held out her palm with several *grossi* in it. She purposely offered him more than she would have given to any other man in the same circumstances. He looked at the coins a little while, and then said—

"Yes, I will take them."

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She poured the coins into his palm, and he grasped them tightly.

"Tell me," said Romola, almost beseechingly. "What shall you——"

But Baldassarre had turned away from her, and was walking again towards the bridge. Passing from it, straight on up the Via del Fosso, he came upon the shop of Niccolò Caparra, and turned towards it without a pause, as if it had been the very object of his search. Niccolò was at that moment in procession with the armourers of Florence, and there was only one apprentice in the shop. But there were all sorts of weapons in abundance hanging there, and Baldassarre's eyes discerned what he was more hungry for than for bread. Niccolò himself would probably have refused to sell anything that might serve as a weapon to this man with signs of the prison on him; but the apprentice, less observant and scrupulous, took three *grossi* for a sharp hunting-knife without any hesitation. It was a conveniently small weapon, which Baldassarre could easily thrust within the breast of his tunic, and he walked on, feeling stronger. That sharp edge might give deadliness to the thrust of an aged arm: at least it was a companion, it was a power in league with him, even if it failed. It would break against armour, but was the armour sure to be always there? In those long months while vengeance had lain in prison, baseness had perhaps become forgetful and secure. The knife had been bought with the traitor's own money. That was just. Before he took the money, he had felt what he should do with

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it—buy a weapon. Yes, and if possible, food too; food to nourish the arm that would grasp the weapon, food to nourish the body which was the temple of vengeance. When he had had enough bread, he should be able to think and act—to think first how he could hide himself, lest Tito should have him dragged away again.

With that idea of hiding in his mind, Baldassarre turned up the narrowest streets, bought himself some meat and bread, and sat down under the first loggia to eat. The bells that swung out louder and louder peals of joy, laying hold of him and making him vibrate along with all the air, seemed to him simply part of that strong world which was against him.

Romola had watched Baldassarre until he had disappeared round the turning into the Piazza de' Mozzi, half feeling that his departure was a relief, half reproaching herself for not seeking with more decision to know the truth about him, for not assuring herself whether there were any guiltless misery in his lot which she was not helpless to relieve. Yet what could she have done if the truth had proved to be the burden of some painful secret about her husband, in addition to the anxieties that already weighed upon her? Surely a wife was permitted to desire ignorance of a husband's wrong-doing, since she alone must not protest and warn men against him. But that thought stirred too many intricate fibres of feeling to be pursued now in her weariness. It was a time to rejoice, since help had come to Florence; and she turned

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into the court to tell the good news to her patients on their straw beds.

She closed the door after her, lest the bells should drown her voice, and then throwing the black drapery from her head, that the women might see her better, she stood in the midst and told them that corn was coming, and that the bells were ringing for gladness at the news. They all sat up to listen, while the children trotted or crawled towards her, and pulled her black skirts, as if they were impatient at being all that long way off her face. She yielded to them, weary as she was, and sat down on the straw, while the little pale things peeped into her basket and pulled her hair down, and the feeble voices around her said, "The Holy Virgin be praised!" "It was the procession!" "The Mother of God has had pity on us!"

At last Romola rose from the heap of straw, too tired to try and smile any longer, saying as she turned up the stone steps—

"I will come by-and-by, to bring you your dinner."

"Bless you, madonna! bless you!" said the faint chorus, in much the same tone as that in which they had a few minutes before praised and thanked the unseen Madonna.

Romola cared a great deal for that music. She had no innate taste for tending the sick and clothing the ragged, like some women to whom the details of such work are welcome in themselves, simply as an occupation. Her early training had kept her aloof from such womanly labours; and if she had not

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brought to them the inspiration of her deepest feelings, they would have been irksome to her. But they had come to be the one unshaken resting-place of her mind, the one narrow pathway on which the light fell clear. If the gulf between herself and Tito which only gathered a more perceptible wideness from her attempts to bridge it by submission, brought a doubt whether, after all, the bond to which she had laboured to be true might not itself be false—if she came away from her confessor, Fra Salvestro, or from some contact with the disciples of Savonarola amongst whom she worshipped, with a sickening sense that these people were miserably narrow, and with an almost impetuous reaction towards her old contempt for their superstition — she found herself recovering a firm footing in her works of womanly sympathy. Whatever else made her doubt, the help she gave to her fellow-citizens made her sure that Fra Girolamo had been right to call her back. According to his unforgotten words, her place had not been empty: it had been filled with her love and her labour. Florence had had need of her, and the more her own sorrow pressed upon her, the more gladness she felt in the memories, stretching through the two long years, of hours and moments in which she had lightened the burden of life to others. All that ardour of her nature which could no longer spend itself in the woman's tenderness for father and husband, had transformed itself into an enthusiasm of sympathy with the general life. She had ceased to think that her own lot could be happy—had ceased to think of happiness at all: the

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one end of her life seemed to her to be the diminishing of sorrow.

Her enthusiasm was continually stirred to fresh vigour by the influence of Savonarola. In spite of the wearisome visions and allegories from which she recoiled in disgust when they came as stale repetitions from other lips than his, her strong affinity for his passionate sympathy and the splendour of his aims had lost none of its power. His burning indignation against the abuses and oppression that made the daily story of the Church and of States had kindled the ready fire in her too. His special care for liberty and purity of government in Florence, with his constant reference of this immediate object to the wider end of a universal regeneration, had created in her a new consciousness of the great drama of human existence in which her life was a part; and through her daily helpful contact with the less fortunate of her fellow-citizens this new consciousness became something stronger than a vague sentiment; it grew into a more and more definite motive of self-denying practice. She thought little about dogmas, and shrank from reflecting closely on the Frate's prophecies of the immediate scourge and closely-following regeneration. She had submitted her mind to his and had entered into communion with the Church, because in this way she had found an immediate satisfaction for moral needs which all the previous culture and experience of her life had left hungering. Fra Girolamo's voice had waked in her mind a reason for living, apart from

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personal enjoyment and personal affection; but it was a reason that seemed to need feeding with greater forces than she possessed within herself, and her submissive use of all offices of the Church was simply a watching and waiting if by any means fresh strength might come. The pressing problem for Romola just then was not to settle questions of controversy, but to keep alive that flame of unselfish emotion by which a life of sadness might still be a life of active love.

Her trust in Savonarola's nature as greater than her own made a large part of the strength she had found. And the trust was not to be lightly shaken. It is not force of intellect which causes ready repulsion from the aberration and eccentricities of greatness, any more than it is force of vision that causes the eye to explore the warts on a face bright with human expression; it is simply the negation of high sensibilities. Romola was so deeply moved by the grand energies of Savonarola's nature, that she found herself listening patiently to all dogmas and prophecies, when they came in the vehicle of his ardent faith and believing utterance.[1]

No soul is desolate as long as there is a human

[1] He himself had had occasion enough to note the efficacy of that vehicle. "If," he says in the *Compendium Revelationum*, "you speak of such as have not heard these things from me, I admit that they who disbelieve are more than they who believe, because it is one thing to hear him who inwardly feels these things, and another to hear him who feels them not; . . . and, therefore, it is well said by St Jerome, 'Habet nescio quid latentis energiæ vivæ vocis actus, et in aures discipuli de auctoris ore transfusa fortis sonat.'"

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being for whom it can feel trust and reverence. Romola's trust in Savonarola was something like a rope suspended securely by her path, making her step elastic while she grasped it; if it were suddenly removed, no firmness of the ground she trod could save her from staggering, or perhaps from falling.

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CHAPTER XLV.

AT THE BARBER'S SHOP.

After that welcome appearance as the messenger with the olive-branch, which was an unpromised favour of fortune, Tito had other commissions to fulfil of a more premeditated character. He paused at the Palazzo Vecchio, and awaited there the return of the Ten, who managed external and war affairs, that he might duly deliver to them the results of his private mission to Pisa, intended as a preliminary to an avowed embassy of which Bernardo Rucellai was to be the head, with the object of coming, if possible, to a pacific understanding with the Emperor Maximilian and the League.

Tito's talents for diplomatic work had been well ascertained, and as he gave with fulness and precision the results of his inquiries and interviews, Bernardo del Nero, who was at that time one of the Ten, could not withhold his admiration. He would have withheld it if he could; for his original dislike of Tito had returned, and become stronger, since the sale of the library. Romola had never uttered a

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word to her godfather on the circumstances of the sale, and Bernardo had understood her silence as a prohibition to him to enter on the subject, but he felt sure that the breach of her father's wish had been a blighting grief to her, and the old man's observant eyes discerned other indications that her married life was not happy.

"Ah," he said, inwardly, "that doubtless is the reason she has taken to listening to Fra Girolamo, and going amongst the Piagnoni, which I never expected from her. These women, if they are not happy, and have no children, must either take to folly or to some overstrained religion that makes them think they've got all heaven's work on their shoulders. And as for my poor child Romola, it is as I always said — the cramming with Latin and Greek has left her as much a woman as if she had done nothing all day but prick her fingers with the needle. And this husband of hers, who gets employed everywhere, because he's a tool with a smooth handle, I wish Tornabuoni and the rest may not find their fingers cut. Well, well, *solco torto, sacco dritto*—many a full sack comes from a crooked furrow; and he who will be captain of none but honest men will have small hire to pay."

With this long-established conviction that there could be no moral sifting of political agents, the old Florentine abstained from all interference in Tito's disfavour. Apart from what must be kept sacred and private for Romola's sake, Bernardo had nothing direct to allege against the useful Greek, except that he was a Greek, and that he, Bernardo, did not like

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him; for the doubleness of feigning attachment to the popular government, while at heart a Medicean, was common to Tito with more than half the Medicean party. He only feigned with more skill than the rest: that was all. So Bernardo was simply cold to Tito, who returned the coldness with a scrupulous, distant respect. And it was still the notion in Florence that the old tie between Bernardo and Bardo made any service done to Romola's husband an acceptable homage to her godfather.

After delivering himself of his charge at the Old Palace, Tito felt that the avowed official work of the day was done. He was tired and adust with long riding; but he did not go home. There were certain things in his scarsella and on his mind, from which he wished to free himself as soon as possible, but the opportunities must be found so skilfully that they must not seem to be sought. He walked from the Palazzo in a sauntering fashion towards the Piazza del Duomo. The procession was at an end now, but the bells were still ringing, and the people were moving about the streets restlessly, longing for some more definite vent to their joy. If the Frate could have stood up in the great Piazza and preached to them, they might have been satisfied, but now, in spite of the new discipline which declared Christ to be the special King of the Florentines and required all pleasures to be of a Christian sort, there was a secret longing in many of the youngsters who shouted "Viva Gesù!" for a little vigorous stone-throwing in sign of thankfulness.

Tito, as he passed along, could not escape being

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recognised by some as the welcome bearer of the olive-branch, and could only rid himself of an inconvenient ovation, chiefly in the form of eager questions, by telling those who pressed on him that Meo di Sasso, the true messenger from Leghorn, must now be entering, and might certainly be met towards the Porta San Frediano. He could tell much more than Tito knew.

Freeing himself from importunities in this adroit manner, he made his way to the Piazza del Duomo, casting his long eyes round the space with an air of the utmost carelessness, but really seeking to detect some presence which might furnish him with one of his desired opportunities. The fact of the procession having terminated at the Duomo made it probable that there would be more than the usual concentration of loungers and talkers in the Piazza and round Nello's shop. It was as he expected. There was a group leaning against the rails near the north gates of the Baptistery, so exactly what he sought, that he looked more indifferent than ever, and seemed to recognise the tallest member of the group entirely by chance as he had half passed him, just turning his head to give him a slight greeting, while he tossed the end of his *becchetto* over his left shoulder.

Yet the tall, broad-shouldered personage greeted in that slight way looked like one who had considerable claims. He wore a richly-embroidered tunic, with a great show of linen, after the newest French mode, and at his belt there hung a sword and poniard of fine workmanship. His hat, with a red plume in it, seemed a scornful protest against the

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gravity of Florentine costume, which had been exaggerated to the utmost under the influence of the Piagnoni. Certain undefinable indications of youth made the breadth of his face and the large diameter of his waist appear the more emphatically a stamp of coarseness, and his eyes had that rude desecrating stare at all men and things which to a refined mind is as intolerable as a bad odour or a flaring light.

He and his companions, also young men dressed expensively and wearing arms, were exchanging jokes with that sort of ostentatious laughter which implies a desire to prove that the laughter is not mortified though some people might suspect it. There were good reasons for such a suspicion; for this broad-shouldered man with the red feather was Dolfo Spini, leader of the Compagnacci, or Evil Companions — that is to say, of all the dissolute young men belonging to the old aristocratic party, enemies of the Mediceans, enemies of the popular government, but still more bitter enemies of Savonarola. Dolfo Spini, heir of the great house with the loggia, over the bridge of the Santa Trinità, had organised these young men into an armed band, as sworn champions of extravagant suppers and all the pleasant sins of the flesh, against reforming pietists who threatened to make the world chaste and temperate to so intolerable a degree that there would soon be no reason for living, except the extreme unpleasantness of the alternative. Up to this very morning he had been loudly declaring that Florence was given up to famine and ruin entirely through its

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blind adherence to the advice of the Frate, and that there could be no salvation for Florence but in joining the League and driving the Frate out of the city —sending him to Rome, in fact, whither he ought to have gone long ago in obedience to the summons of the Pope. It was suspected, therefore, that Messer Dolfo Spini's heart was not aglow with pure joy at the unexpected succours which had come in apparent fulfilment of the Frate's prediction, and the laughter, which was ringing out afresh as Tito joined the group at Nello's door, did not serve to dissipate the suspicion. For leaning against the door-post in the centre of the group was a close-shaven, keen-eyed personage, named Niccolò Macchiavelli, who, young as he was, had penetrated all the small secrets of egoism.

"Messer Dolfo's head," he was saying, "is more of a pumpkin than I thought. I measure men's dulness by the devices they trust in for deceiving others. Your dullest animal of all is he who grins and says he doesn't mind just after he has had his shins kicked. If I were a trifle duller, now," he went on, smiling as the circle opened to admit Tito, "I should pretend to be fond of this Melema, who has got a secretaryship that would exactly suit me —as if Latin ill-paid could love better Latin that's better paid! Melema, you are a pestiferously clever fellow, very much in my way, and I'm sorry to hear you've had another piece of good-luck to-day."

"Questionable luck, Niccolò," said Tito, touching him on the shoulder in a friendly way; "I have got nothing by it yet but being laid hold of and breathed

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upon by wool-beaters, when I am as soiled and battered with riding as a *tabellario* (letter-carrier) from Bologna."

"Ah! you want a touch of my art, Messer Oratore," said Nello, who had come forward at the sound of Tito's voice; "your chin, I perceive, has yesterday's crop upon it. Come, come—consign yourself to the priest of all the Muses. Sandro, quick with the lather!"

"In truth, Nello, that is just what I most desire at this moment," said Tito, seating himself; "and that was why I turned my steps towards thy shop, instead of going home at once, when I had done my business at the Palazzo."

"Yes, indeed, it is not fitting that you should present yourself to Madonna Romola with a rusty chin and a tangled *zazzera*. Nothing that is not dainty ought to approach the Florentine lily; though I see her constantly going about like a sunbeam amongst the rags that line our corners —if indeed she is not more like a moonbeam now, for I thought yesterday, when I met her, that she looked as pale and worn as that fainting Madonna of Fra Giovanni's. You must see to it, my bel erudito: she keeps too many fasts and vigils in your absence."

Tito gave a melancholy shrug. "It is too true, Nello. She has been depriving herself of half her proper food every day during this famine. But what can I do? Her mind has been set all aflame. A husband's influence is powerless against the Frate's."

"As every other influence is likely to be, that of

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the Holy Father included," said Domenico Cennini, one of the group at the door, who had turned in with Tito. "I don't know whether you have gathered anything at Pisa about the way the wind sits at Rome, Melema?"

"Secrets of the council chamber, Messer Domenico!" said Tito, smiling and opening his palms in a deprecatory manner. "An envoy must be as dumb as a father confessor."

"Certainly, certainly," said Cennini. "I ask for no breach of that rule. Well, my belief is, that if his Holiness were to drive Fra Girolamo to extremity, the Frate would move heaven and earth to get a General Council of the Church—ay, and would get it too; and I, for one, should not be sorry, though I'm no Piagnone."

"With leave of your greater experience, Messer Domenico," said Macchiavelli, "I must differ from you—not in your wish to see a General Council which might reform the Church, but in your belief that the Frate will checkmate his Holiness. The Frate's game is an impossible one. If he had contented himself with preaching against the vices of Rome, and with prophesying that in some way, not mentioned, Italy would be scourged, depend upon it Pope Alexander would have allowed him to spend his breath in that way as long as he could find hearers. Such spiritual blasts as those knock no walls down. But the Frate wants to be something more than a spiritual trumpet: he wants to be a lever, and what is more, he *is* a lever. He wants to spread the doctrine of Christ by maintaining a popular

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government in Florence, and the Pope, as I know, on the best authority, has private views to the contrary."

"Then Florence will stand by the Frate," Cennini broke in, with some fervour. "I myself should prefer that he would let his prophesying alone, but if our freedom to choose our own government is to be attacked—I am an obedient son of the Church, but I would vote for resisting Pope Alexander the Sixth, as our forefathers resisted Pope Gregory the Eleventh."

"But pardon me, Messer Domenico," said Macchiavelli, sticking his thumbs into his belt, and speaking with that cool enjoyment of exposition which surmounts every other force in discussion. "Have you correctly seized the Frate's position? How is it that he has become a lever, and made himself worth attacking by an acute man like his Holiness? Because he has got the ear of the people: because he gives them threats and promises, which they believe come straight from God, not only about hell, purgatory, and paradise, but about Pisa and our Great Council. But let events go against him, so as to shake the people's faith, and the cause of his power will be the cause of his fall. He is accumulating three sorts of hatred on his head—the hatred of average mankind against every one who wants to lay on them a strict yoke of virtue; the hatred of the stronger powers in Italy who want to farm Florence for their own purposes; and the hatred of the people, to whom he has ventured to promise good in this world, instead of confining his promises

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to the next. If a prophet is to keep his power, he must be a prophet like Mahomet, with an army at his back, that when the people's faith is fainting it may be frightened into life again."

"Rather sum up the three sorts of hatred in one," said Francesco Cei, impetuously, "and say he has won the hatred of all men who have sense and honesty, by inventing hypocritical lies. His proper place is among the false prophets in the Inferno, who walk with their heads turned hindforemost."

"You are too angry, my Francesco," said Macchiavelli, smiling; "you poets are apt to cut the clouds in your wrath. I am no votary of the Frate's, and would not lay down my little finger for his veracity. But veracity is a plant of paradise, and the seeds have never flourished beyond the walls. You, yourself, my Francesco, tell poetical lies only; partly compelled by the poet's fervour, partly to please your audience; but you object to lies in prose. Well, the Frate differs from you as to the boundary of poetry, that's all. When he gets into the pulpit of the Duomo, he has the fervour within him, and without him he has the audience to please. Ecco!"

"You are somewhat lax there, Niccolò," said Cennini, gravely. "I myself believe in the Frate's integrity, though I don't believe in his prophecies, and as long as his integrity is not disproved, we have a popular party strong enough to protect him and resist foreign interference."

"A party that seems strong enough," said Macchiavelli, with a shrug, and an almost imperceptible glance towards Tito, who was abandoning

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himself with much enjoyment to Nello's combing and scenting. "But how many Mediceans are there among you? How many who will not be turned round by a private grudge?"

"As to the Mediceans," said Cennini, "I believe there is very little genuine feeling left on behalf of the Medici. Who would risk much for Piero de' Medici? A few old staunch friends, perhaps, like Bernardo del Nero; but even some of those most connected with the family are hearty friends of the popular government, and would exert themselves for the Frate. I was talking to Giannozzo Pucci only a little while ago, and I am convinced there's nothing he would set his face against more than against any attempt to alter the new order of things."

"You are right there, Messer Domenico," said Tito, with a laughing meaning in his eyes, as he rose from the shaving-chair; "and I fancy the tender passion came in aid of hard theory there. I am persuaded there was some jealousy at the bottom of Giannozzo's alienation from Piero de' Medici; else so amiable a creature as he would never feel the bitterness he sometimes allows to escape him in that quarter. He was in the procession with you, I suppose?"

"No," said Cennini; "he is at his villa—went there three days ago."

Tito was settling his cap and glancing down at his splashed hose as if he hardly heeded the answer. In reality he had obtained a much-desired piece of

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information. He had at that moment in his scarsella a crushed gold ring which he had engaged to deliver to Giannozzo Pucci. He had received it from an envoy of Piero de' Medici, whom he had ridden out of his way to meet at Certaldo on the Siena road. Since Pucci was not in the town, he would send the ring by Fra Michele, a Carthusian lay Brother in the service of the Mediceans, and the receipt of that sign would bring Pucci back to hear the verbal part of Tito's mission.

"Behold him!" said Nello, flourishing his comb and pointing it at Tito, "the handsomest scholar in the world or in the wolds,[1] now he has passed through my hands! A trifle thinner in the face, though, than when he came in his first bloom to Florence—eh? and, I vow, there are some lines just faintly hinting themselves about your mouth, Messer Oratore! Ah, mind is an enemy to beauty! I myself was thought beautiful by the women at one time—when I was in my swaddling-bands. But now —oimè! I carry my unwritten poems in cipher on my face!"

Tito, laughing with the rest as Nello looked at himself tragically in the hand-mirror, made a sign of farewell to the company generally, and took his departure.

"I'm of our old Piero di Cosimo's mind," said Francesco Cei. "I don't half like Melema. That trick of smiling gets stronger than ever—no wonder he has lines about the mouth."

"He's too successful," said Macchiavelli, playfully.

[1] "Del mondo o di maremma."

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"I'm sure there's something wrong about him, else he wouldn't have that secretaryship."

"He's an able man," said Cennini, in a tone of judicial fairness. "I and my brother have always found him useful with our Greek sheets, and he gives great satisfaction to the Ten. I like to see a young man work his way upward by merit. And the secretary Scala, who befriended him from the first, thinks highly of him still, I know."

"Doubtless," said a notary in the background. "He writes Scala's official letters for him, or corrects them, and gets well paid for it too."

"I wish Messer Bartolommeo would pay *me* to doctor his gouty Latin," said Macchiavelli, with a shrug. "Did *he* tell you about the pay, Ser Ceccone, or was it Melema himself?" he added, looking at the notary with a face ironically innocent.

"Melema? no, indeed," answered Ser Ceccone. "He is as close as a nut. He never brags. That's why he's employed everywhere. They say he's getting rich with doing all sorts of underhand work."

"It *is* a little too bad," said Macchiavelli, "and so many able notaries out of employment!"

"Well, I must say I thought that was a nasty story a year or two ago about the man who said he had stolen jewels," said Cei. "It got hushed up somehow; but I remember Piero di Cosimo said, at the time, he believed there was something in it, for he saw Melema's face when the man laid hold of him, and he never saw a visage so 'painted with fear,' as our sour old Dante says."

"Come, spit no more of that venom, Francesco,"

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said Nello, getting indignant, "else I shall consider it a public duty to cut your hair awry the next time I get you under my scissors. That story of the stolen jewels was a lie. Bernardo Rucellai and the Magnificent Eight knew all about it. The man was a dangerous madman, and he was very properly kept out of mischief in prison. As for our Piero di Cosimo, his wits are running after the wind of Mongibello: he has such an extravagant fancy that he would take a lizard for a crocodile. No: that story has been dead and buried too long—our noses object to it."

"It is true," said Macchiavelli. "You forget the danger of the precedent, Francesco. The next mad beggarman may accuse you of stealing his verses, or me, God help me! of stealing his coppers. Ah!" he went on, turning towards the door, "Dolfo Spini has carried his red feather out of the Piazza. That captain of swaggerers would like the Republic to lose Pisa just for the chance of seeing the people tear the frock off the Frate's back. With your pardon, Francesco—I know he is a friend of yours—there are few things I should like better than to see him play the part of Capo d'Oca, who went out to the tournament blowing his trumpets and returned with them in a bag."

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CHAPTER XLVI.

BY A STREET LAMP.

THAT evening, when it was dark and threatening rain, Romola, returning with Maso and the lantern by her side, from the hospital of San Matteo, which she had visited after vespers, encountered her husband just issuing from the monastery of San Marco. Tito, who had gone out again shortly after his arrival in the Via de' Bardi, and had seen little of Romola during the day, immediately proposed to accompany her home, dismissing Maso, whose short steps annoyed him. It was only usual for him to pay her such an official attention when it was obviously demanded from him. Tito and Romola never jarred, never remonstrated with each other. They were too hopelessly alienated in their inner life ever to have that contest which is an effort towards agreement. They talked of all affairs, public and private, with careful adherence to an adopted course. If Tito wanted a supper prepared in the old library, now pleasantly furnished as a banqueting-room, Romola assented, and saw that everything needful

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was done: and Tito, on his side, left her entirely uncontrolled in her daily habits, accepting the help she offered him in transcribing or making digests, and in return meeting her conjectured want of supplies for her charities. Yet he constantly, as on this very morning, avoided exchanging glances with her; affected to believe that she was out of the house, in order to avoid seeking her in her own room; and playfully attributed to her a perpetual preference of solitude to his society.

In the first ardour of her self-conquest, after she had renounced her resolution of flight, Romola had made many timid efforts towards the return of a frank relation between them. But to her such a relation could only come by open speech about their differences, and the attempt to arrive at a moral understanding; while Tito could only be saved from alienation from her by such a recovery of her effusive tenderness as would have presupposed oblivion of their differences. He cared for no explanation between them; he felt any thorough explanation impossible: he would have cared to have Romola fond again, and to her, fondness was impossible. She could be submissive and gentle, she could repress any sign of repulsion; but tenderness was not to be feigned. She was helplessly conscious of the result: her husband was alienated from her.

It was an additional reason why she should be carefully kept outside of secrets which he would in no case have chosen to communicate to her. With regard to his political action he sought to convince her that he considered the cause of the Medici hope-

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less; and that on that practical ground, as well as in theory, he heartily served the popular government, in which she had now a warm interest. But impressions subtle as odours made her uneasy about his relations with San Marco. She was painfully divided between the dread of seeing any evidence to arouse her suspicions, and the impulse to watch lest any harm should come that she might have arrested.

As they walked together this evening, Tito said —"The business of the day is not yet quite ended for me. I shall conduct you to our door, my Romola, and then I must fulfil another commission, which will take me an hour, perhaps, before I can return and rest, as I very much need to do."

And then he talked amusingly of what he had seen at Pisa, until they were close upon a loggia, near which there hung a lamp before a picture of the Virgin. The street was a quiet one, and hitherto they had passed few people; but now there was a sound of many approaching footsteps and confused voices.

"We shall not get home without a wetting, unless we take shelter under this convenient loggia," Tito said, hastily, hurrying Romola, with a slightly startled movement, up the step of the loggia.

"Surely it is useless to wait for this small drizzling rain," said Romola, in surprise.

"No: I felt it becoming heavier. Let us wait a little." With that wakefulness to the faintest indication which belongs to a mind habitually in a

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state of caution, Tito had detected by the glimmer of the lamp that the leader of the advancing group wore a red feather and a glittering sword-hilt—in fact, was almost the last person in the world he would have chosen to meet at this hour with Romola by his side. He had already during the day had one momentous interview with Dolfo Spini, and the business he had spoken of to Romola as yet to be done was a second interview with that personage, a sequence of the visit he had paid at San Marco. Tito, by a long-preconcerted plan, had been the bearer of letters to Savonarola — carefully-forged letters; one of them, by a stratagem, bearing the very signature and seal of the Cardinal of Naples, who of all the Sacred College had most exerted his influence at Rome in favour of the Frate. The purport of the letters was to state that the Cardinal was on his progress from Pisa, and, unwilling for strong reasons to enter Florence, yet desirous of taking counsel with Savonarola at this difficult juncture, intended to pause this very day at San Casciano, about ten miles from the city, whence he would ride out the next morning in the plain garb of a priest, and meet Savonarola, as if casually, five miles on the Florence road, two hours after sunrise. The plot, of which these forged letters were the initial step, was that Dolfo Spini with a band of his Compagnacci was to be posted in ambush on the road, at a lonely spot about five miles from the gates; that he was to seize Savonarola with the Dominican brother who would accompany him according to rule, and deliver him over to a small detachment

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of Milanese horse in readiness near San Casciano, by whom he was to be carried into the Roman territory.

There was a strong chance that the penetrating Frate would suspect a trap, and decline to incur the risk, which he had for some time avoided, of going beyond the city walls. Even when he preached, his friends held it necessary that he should be attended by an armed guard; and here he was called on to commit himself to a solitary road, with no other attendant than a fellow-monk. On this ground the minimum of time had been given him for decision, and the chance in favour of his acting on the letters was, that the eagerness with which his mind was set on the combining of interests within and without the Church towards the procuring of a General Council, and also the expectation of immediate service from the Cardinal in the actual juncture of his contest with the Pope, would triumph over his shrewdness and caution in the brief space allowed for deliberation.

Tito had had an audience of Savonarola, having declined to put the letters into any hands but his, and with consummate art had admitted that incidentally, and by inference, he was able so far to conjecture their purport as to believe they referred to a rendezvous outside the gates, in which case he urged that the Frate should seek an armed guard from the Signoria, and offered his services in carrying the request with the utmost privacy. Savonarola had replied briefly that this was impossible: an armed guard was incompatible with privacy.

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He spoke with a flashing eye, and Tito felt convinced that he meant to incur the risk.

Tito himself did not much care for the result. He managed his affairs so cleverly, that all results, he considered, must turn to his advantage. Whichever party came uppermost, he was secure of favour and money. That is an indecorously naked statement; the fact, clothed as Tito habitually clothed it, was that his acute mind, discerning the equal hollowness of all parties, took the only rational course in making them subservient to his own interest.

If Savonarola fell into the snare, there were diamonds in question and papal patronage; if not, Tito's adroit agency had strengthened his position with Savonarola and with Spini, while any confidences he obtained from them made him the more valuable as an agent of the Mediceans.

But Spini was an inconvenient colleague. He had cunning enough to delight in plots, but not the ability or self-command necessary to so complex an effect as secrecy. He frequently got excited with drinking, for even sober Florence had its "Beoni," or topers, both lay and clerical, who became loud at taverns and private banquets; and in spite of the agreement between him and Tito, that their public recognition of each other should invariably be of the coolest sort, there was always the possibility that on an evening encounter he would be suddenly blurting and affectionate. The delicate sign of casting the becchetto over the left shoulder was understood in the morning, but the strongest

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hint short of a threat might not suffice to keep off a fraternal grasp of the shoulder in the evening.

Tito's chief hope now was that Dolfo Spini had not caught sight of him, and the hope would have been well founded if Spini had had no clearer view of him than he had caught of Spini. But, himself in shadow, he had seen Tito illuminated for an instant by the direct rays of the lamp, and Tito in his way was as strongly marked a personage as the captain of the Compagnacci. Romola's black-shrouded figure had escaped notice, and she now stood behind her husband's shoulder in the corner of the loggia. Tito was not left to hope long.

"Ha! my carrier-pigeon!" grated Spini's harsh voice, in what he meant to be an undertone, while his hand grasped Tito's shoulder; "what did you run into hiding for? You didn't know it was comrades who were coming. It's well I caught sight of you; it saves time. What of the chase to-morrow morning? Will the bald-headed game rise? Are the falcons to be got ready?"

If it had been in Tito's nature to feel an access of rage, he would have felt it against this bull-faced accomplice, unfit either for a leader or a tool. His lips turned white, but his excitement came from the pressing difficulty of choosing a safe device. If he attempted to hush Spini, that would only deepen Romola's suspicion, and he knew her well enough to know that if some strong alarm were roused in her, she was neither to be silenced nor hoodwinked: on the other hand, if he repelled Spini angrily the wine-breathing Compagnaccio might become savage,

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being more ready at resentment than at the divination of motives. He adopted a third course, which proved that Romola retained one sort of power over him—the power of dread.

He pressed her hand, as if intending a hint to her, and said in a good-humoured tone of comradeship—

"Yes, my Dolfo, you may prepare in all security. But take no trumpets with you."

"Don't be afraid," said Spini, a little piqued. "No need to play Ser Saccente with me. I know where the devil keeps his tail as well as you do. What! he swallowed the bait whole? The prophetic nose didn't scent the hook at all?" he went on, lowering his tone a little, with a blundering sense of secrecy.

"The brute will not be satisfied till he has emptied the bag," thought Tito: but aloud he said, —"Swallowed all as easily as you swallow a cup of Trebbiano. Ha! I see torches: there must be a dead body coming. The pestilence has been spreading, I hear."

"Santiddio! I hate the sight of those biers. Good night," said Spini, hastily moving off.

The torches were really coming, but they preceded a church dignitary who was returning homeward; the suggestion of the dead body and the pestilence was Tito's device for getting rid of Spini without telling him to go. The moment he had moved away, Tito turned to Romola, and said, quietly—

"Do not be alarmed by anything that *bestia* has

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said, my Romola. We will go on now: I think the rain has not increased."

She was quivering with indignant resolution; it was of no use for Tito to speak in that unconcerned way. She distrusted every word he could utter.

"I will not go on," she said. "I will not move nearer home until I have some security against this treachery being perpetrated."

"Wait, at least, until these torches have passed," said Tito, with perfect self-command, but with a new rising of dislike to a wife who this time, he foresaw, might have the power of thwarting him in spite of the husband's predominance.

The torches passed, with the Vicario dell' Arcivescovo, and due reverence was done by Tito, but Romola saw nothing outward. If for the defeat of this treachery, in which she believed with all the force of long presentiment, it had been necessary at that moment for her to spring on her husband and hurl herself with him down a precipice, she felt as if she could have done it. Union with this man! At that moment the self-quelling discipline of two years seemed to be nullified: she felt nothing but that they were divided.

They were nearly in darkness again, and could only see each other's faces dimly.

"Tell me the truth, Tito—this time tell me the truth," said Romola, in a low quivering voice. "It will be safer for you."

"Why should I desire to tell you anything else, my angry saint?" said Tito, with a slight touch of contempt, which was the vent of his annoyance;

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"since the truth is precisely that over which you have most reason to rejoice—namely, that my knowing a plot of Spini's enables me to secure the Frate from falling a victim to it."

"What is the plot?"

"That I decline to tell," said Tito. "It is enough that the Frate's safety will be secured."

"It is a plot for drawing him outside the gates that Spini may murder him."

"There has been no intention of murder. It is simply a plot for compelling him to obey the Pope's summons to Rome. But as I serve the popular government, and think the Frate's presence here is a necessary means of maintaining it at present, I choose to prevent his departure. You may go to sleep with entire ease of mind to-night."

For a moment Romola was silent. Then she said, in a voice of anguish, "Tito, it is of no use: I have no belief in you."

She could just discern his action as he shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his palms in silence. That cold dislike which is the anger of unimpassioned beings was hardening within him.

"If the Frate leaves the city — if any harm happens to him," said Romola, after a slight pause, in a new tone of indignant resolution,—"I will declare what I have heard to the Signoria, and you will be disgraced. What if I am your wife?" she went on, impetuously; "I will be disgraced with you. If we are united, I am that part of you that will save you from crime. Others shall not be betrayed."

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"I am quite aware of what you would be likely to do, *anima mia*," said Tito, in the coolest of his liquid tones; "therefore if you have a small amount of reasoning at your disposal just now, consider that if you believe me in nothing else, you may believe me when I say I will take care of myself, and not put it in your power to ruin me."

"Then you assure me that the Frate is warned—he will not go beyond the gates?"

"He shall not go beyond the gates."

There was a moment's pause, but distrust was not to be expelled.

"I will go back to San Marco now and find out," Romola said, making a movement forward.

"You shall not!" said Tito, in a bitter whisper, seizing her wrists with all his masculine force. "I am master of you. You shall not set yourself in opposition to me."

There were passers-by approaching. Tito had heard them, and that was why he spoke in a whisper. Romola was too conscious of being mastered to have struggled, even if she had remained unconscious that witnesses were at hand. But she was aware now of footsteps and voices, and her habitual sense of personal dignity made her at once yield to Tito's movement towards leading her from the loggia.

They walked on in silence for some time, under the small drizzling rain. The first rush of indignation and alarm in Romola had begun to give way to more complicated feelings, which rendered speech and action difficult. In that simpler state of vehe-

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mence, open opposition to the husband from whom she felt her soul revolting had had the aspect of temptation for her; it seemed the easiest of all courses. But now, habits of self-questioning, memories of impulse subdued, and that proud reserve which all discipline had left unmodified, began to emerge from the flood of passion. The grasp of her wrists, which asserted her husband's physical predominance, instead of arousing a new fierceness in her, as it might have done if her impetuosity had been of a more vulgar kind, had given her a momentary shuddering horror at this form of contest with him. It was the first time they had been in declared hostility to each other since her flight and return, and the check given to her ardent resolution then, retained the power to arrest her now. In this altered condition her mind began to dwell on the probabilities that would save her from any desperate course: Tito would not risk betrayal by her; whatever had been his original intention, he must be determined now by the fact that she knew of the plot. She was not bound now to do anything else than to hang over him that certainty, that if he deceived her, her lips would not be closed. And then, it was possible—yes, she must cling to that possibility till it was disproved—that Tito had never meant to aid in the betrayal of the Frate.

Tito, on his side, was busy with thoughts, and did not speak again till they were near home. Then he said—

"Well, Romola, have you now had time to recover calmness? If so, you can supply your want of

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belief in me by a little rational inference: you can see, I presume, that if I had had any intention of furthering Spini's plot, I should now be aware that the possession of a fair Piagnone for my wife, who knows the secret of the plot, would be a serious obstacle in my way."

Tito assumed the tone which was just then the easiest to him, conjecturing that in Romola's present mood persuasive deprecation would be lost upon her.

"Yes, Tito," she said, in a low voice, "I think you believe that I would guard the Republic from further treachery. You are right to believe it: if the Frate is betrayed, I will denounce you." She paused a moment, and then said, with an effort, "But it was not so. I have perhaps spoken too hastily—you never meant it. Only, why will you seem to be that man's comrade?"

"Such relations are inevitable to practical men, my Romola," said Tito, gratified by discerning the struggle within her. "You fair creatures live in the clouds. Pray go to rest with an easy heart," he added, opening the door for her.

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CHAPTER XLVII.

CHECK.

Tito's clever arrangements had been unpleasantly frustrated by trivial incidents which could not enter into a clever man's calculations. It was very seldom that he walked with Romola in the evening, yet he had happened to be walking with her precisely on this evening when her presence was supremely inconvenient. Life was so complicated a game that the devices of skill were liable to be defeated at every turn by air-blown chances, incalculable as the descent of thistle-down.

It was not that he minded about the failure of Spini's plot, but he felt an awkward difficulty in so adjusting his warning to Savonarola on the one hand, and to Spini on the other, as not to incur suspicion. Suspicion roused in the popular party might be fatal to his reputation and ostensible position in Florence: suspicion roused in Dolfo Spini might be as disagreeable in its effects as the hatred of a fierce dog not to be chained.

If Tito went forthwith to the monastery to warn

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Savonarola before the monks went to rest, his warning would follow so closely on his delivery of the forged letters that he could not escape unfavourable surmises. He could not warn Spini at once without telling him the true reason, since he could not immediately allege the discovery that Savonarola had changed his purpose; and he knew Spini well enough to know that his understanding would discern nothing but that Tito had "turned round" and frustrated the plot. On the other hand, by deferring his warning to Savonarola until the morning, he would be almost sure to lose the opportunity of warning Spini that the Frate had changed his mind; and the band of Compagnacci would come back in all the rage of disappointment. This last, however, was the risk he chose, trusting to his power of soothing Spini by assuring him that the failure was due only to the Frate's caution.

Tito was annoyed. If he had had to smile it would have been an unusual effort to him. He was determined not to encounter Romola again, and he did not go home that night.

She watched through the night, and never took off her clothes. She heard the rain become heavier and heavier. She liked to hear the rain: the stormy heavens seemed a safeguard against men's devices, compelling them to inaction. And Romola's mind was again assailed, not only by the utmost doubt of her husband, but by doubt as to her own conduct. What lie might he not have told her? What project might he not have, of which she was still ignorant? Every one who trusted Tito was in danger; it was

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useless to try and persuade herself of the contrary. And was not she selfishly listening to the promptings of her own pride, when she shrank from warning men against him? "If her husband was a malefactor, her place was in the prison by his side"—that might be; she was contented to fulfil that claim. But was she, a wife, to allow a husband to inflict the injuries that would make him a malefactor, when it might be in her power to prevent them? Prayer seemed impossible to her. The activity of her thought excluded a mental state of which the essence is expectant passivity.

The excitement became stronger and stronger. Her imagination, in a state of morbid activity, conjured up possible schemes by which, after all, Tito would have eluded her threat; and towards daybreak the rain became less violent, till at last it ceased, the breeze rose again and dispersed the clouds, and the morning fell clear on all the objects around her. It made her uneasiness all the less endurable. She wrapped her mantle round her, and ran up to the loggia, as if there could be anything in the wide landscape that might determine her action; as if there could be anything but roofs hiding the line of street along which Savonarola might be walking towards betrayal.

If she went to her godfather, might she not induce him, without any specific revelation, to take measures for preventing Fra Girolamo from passing the gates? But that might be too late. Romola thought, with new distress, that she had failed to learn any guiding details from Tito, and it was already long past

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seven. She must go to San Marco: there was nothing else to be done.

She hurried down the stairs, she went out into the street without looking at her sick people, and walked at a swift pace along the Via de' Bardi towards the Ponte Vecchio. She would go through the heart of the city; it was the most direct road, and, besides, in the great Piazza there was a chance of encountering her husband, who, by some possibility to which she still clung, might satisfy her of the Frate's safety, and leave no need for her to go to San Marco. When she arrived in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, she looked eagerly into the pillared court; then her eyes swept the Piazza; but the well-known figure, once painted in her heart by young love, and now branded there by eating pain, was nowhere to be seen. She hurried straight on to the Piazza del Duomo. It was already full of movement: there were worshippers passing up and down the marble steps, there were men pausing for chat, and there were market-people carrying their burdens. Between those moving figures Romola caught a glimpse of her husband. On his way from San Marco he had turned into Nello's shop, and was now leaning against the doorpost. As Romola approached she could see that he was standing and talking, with the easiest air in the world, holding his cap in his hand, and shaking back his freshly-combed hair. The contrast of this ease with the bitter anxieties he had created convulsed her with indignation: the new vision of his hardness heightened her dread. She recognised Cronaca and two other frequenters of San Marco

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standing near her husband. It flashed through her mind—"I will compel him to speak before those men." And her light step brought her close upon him before he had time to move, while Cronaca was saying, "Here comes Madonna Romola."

A slight shock passed through Tito's frame as he felt himself face to face with his wife. She was haggard with her anxious watching, but there was a flash of something else than anxiety in her eyes as she said—

"Is the Frate gone beyond the gates?"

"No," said Tito, feeling completely helpless before this woman, and needing all the self-command he possessed to preserve a countenance in which there should seem to be nothing stronger than surprise.

"And you are certain that he is not going?" she insisted.

"I am certain that he is not going."

"That is enough," said Romola, and she turned up the steps, to take refuge in the Duomo, till she could recover from her agitation.

Tito never had a feeling so near hatred as that with which his eyes followed Romola retreating up the steps.

There were present not only genuine followers of the Frate, but Ser Ceccone, the notary, who at that time, like Tito himself, was secretly an agent of the Mediceans.

Ser Francesco di Ser Barone, more briefly known to infamy as Ser Ceccone, was not learned, not handsome, not successful, and the reverse of generous. He was a traitor without charm. It followed that he was not fond of Tito Melema.

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CHAPTER XLVIII.

COUNTER-CHECK.

It was late in the afternoon when Tito returned home. Romola, seated opposite the cabinet in her narrow room, copying documents, was about to desist from her work because the light was getting dim, when her husband entered. He had come straight to this room to seek her, with a thoroughly defined intention, and there was something new to Romola in his manner and expression as he looked at her silently on entering, and, without taking off his cap and mantle, leaned one elbow on the cabinet, and stood directly in front of her.

Romola, fully assured during the day of the Frate's safety, was feeling the reaction of some penitence for the access of distrust and indignation which had impelled her to address her husband publicly on a matter that she knew he wished to be private. She told herself that she had probably been wrong. The scheming duplicity which she had heard even her godfather allude to as inseparable from party tactics might be sufficient to account for the connection

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with Spini, without the supposition that Tito had ever meant to further the plot. She wanted to atone for her impetuosity by confessing that she had been too hasty, and for some hours her mind had been dwelling on the possibility that this confession of hers might lead to other frank words breaking the two years' silence of their hearts. The silence had been so complete, that Tito was ignorant of her having fled from him and come back again; they had never approached an avowal of that past which, both in its young love and in the shock that shattered the love, lay locked away from them like a banquet-room where death had once broken the feast.

She looked up at him with that submission in her glance which belonged to her state of self-reproof; but the subtle change in his face and manner arrested her speech. For a few moments they remained silent, looking at each other.

Tito himself felt that a crisis was come in his married life. The husband's determination to mastery, which lay deep below all blandness and beseechingness, had risen permanently to the surface now, and seemed to alter his face, as a face is altered by a hidden muscular tension with which a man is secretly throttling or stamping out the life from something feeble, yet dangerous.

"Romola," he began, in the cool liquid tone that made her shiver, "it is time that we should understand each other." He paused.

"That is what I most desire, Tito," she said, faintly. Her sweet pale face, with all its anger gone and nothing but the timidity of self-doubt in it,

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seemed to give a marked predominance to her husband's dark strength.

"You took a step this morning," Tito went on, "which you must now yourself perceive to have been useless—which exposed you to remark and may involve me in serious practical difficulties."

"I acknowledge that I was too hasty; I am sorry for any injustice I may have done you." Romola spoke these words in a fuller and firmer tone; Tito, she hoped, would look less hard when she had expressed her regret, and then she could say other things.

"I wish you once for all to understand," he said, without any change of voice, "that such collisions are incompatible with our position as husband and wife. I wish you to reflect on the mode in which you were led to that step, that the process may not be repeated."

"That depends chiefly on you, Tito," said Romola, taking fire slightly. It was not at all what she had thought of saying, but we see a very little way before us in mutual speech.

"You would say, I suppose," answered Tito, "that nothing is to occur in future which can excite your unreasonable suspicions. You were frank enough to say last night that you have no belief in me. I am not surprised at any exaggerated conclusion you may draw from slight premises, but I wish to point out to you what is likely to be the fruit of your making such exaggerated conclusions a ground for interfering in affairs of which you are ignorant. Your attention is thoroughly awake to what I am saying?"

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He paused for a reply.

"Yes," said Romola, flushing in irrepressible resentment at this cold tone of superiority.

"Well, then, it may possibly not be very long before some other chance words or incidents set your imagination at work devising crimes for me, and you may perhaps rush to the Palazzo Vecchio to alarm the Signoria and set the city in an uproar. Shall I tell you what may be the result? Not simply the disgrace of your husband, to which you look forward with so much courage, but the arrest and ruin of many among the chief men in Florence, including Messer Bernardo del Nero."

Tito had meditated a decisive move, and he had made it. The flush died out of Romola's face, and her very lips were pale—an unusual effect with her, for she was little subject to fear. Tito perceived his success.

"You would perhaps flatter yourself," he went on, "that you were performing a heroic deed of deliverance; you might as well try to turn locks with fine words as apply such notions to the politics of Florence. The question now is, not whether you can have any belief in me, but whether, now you have been warned, you will dare to rush, like a blind man with a torch in his hand, amongst intricate affairs of which you know nothing."

Romola felt as if her mind were held in a vice by Tito's: the possibilities he had indicated were rising before her with terrible clearness.

"I am too rash," she said. "I will try not to be rash."

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"Remember," said Tito, with unsparing insistance, "that your act of distrust towards me this morning might, for aught you knew, have had more fatal effects than that sacrifice of your husband which you have learned to contemplate without flinching."

"Tito, it is not so," Romola burst forth in a pleading tone, rising and going nearer to him, with a desperate resolution to speak out. "It is false that I would willingly sacrifice you. It has been the greatest effort of my life to cling to you. I went away in my anger two years ago, and I came back again because I was more bound to you than to anything else on earth. But it is useless. You shut me out from your mind. You affect to think of me as a being too unreasonable to share in the knowledge of your affairs. You will be open with me about nothing."

She looked like his good angel pleading with him, as she bent her face towards him with dilated eyes, and laid her hand upon his arm. But Romola's touch and glance no longer stirred any fibre of tenderness in her husband. The good-humoured, tolerant Tito, incapable of hatred, incapable almost of impatience, disposed always to be gentle towards the rest of the world, felt himself becoming strangely hard towards this wife whose presence had once been the strongest influence he had known. With all his softness of disposition, he had a masculine effectiveness of intellect and purpose which, like sharpness of edge, is itself an energy, working its way without any strong momentum. Romola had an energy of her own which thwarted his, and no

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man, who is not exceptionally feeble, will endure being thwarted by his wife. Marriage must be a relation either of sympathy or of conquest.

No emotion darted across his face as he heard Romola for the first time speak of having gone away from him. His lips only looked a little harder as he smiled slightly and said—

"My Romola, when certain conditions are ascertained, we must make up our minds to them. No amount of wishing will fill the Arno, as your people say, or turn a plum into an orange. I have not observed even that prayers have much efficacy that way. You are so constituted as to have certain strong impressions inaccessible to reason: I cannot share those impressions, and you have withdrawn all trust from me in consequence. You have changed towards me; it has followed that I have changed towards you. It is useless to take any retrospect. We have simply to adapt ourselves to altered conditions."

"Tito, it would not be useless for us to speak openly," said Romola, with the sort of exasperation that comes from using living muscle against some lifeless insurmountable resistance. "It was the sense of deception in you that changed me, and that has kept us apart. And it is not true that I changed first. You changed towards me the night you first wore that chain-armour. You had some secret from me—it was about that old man—and I saw him again yesterday. Tito," she went on, in a tone of agonised entreaty, "if you would once tell me everything, let it be what it may—I would not

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mind pain—that there might be no wall between us! Is it not possible that we could begin a new life?"

This time there was a flash of emotion across Tito's face. He stood perfectly still; but the flash seemed to have whitened him. He took no notice of Romola's appeal, but after a moment's pause, said quietly—

"Your impetuosity about trifles, Romola, has a freezing influence that would cool the baths of Nero." At these cutting words, Romola shrank and drew herself up into her usual self-sustained attitude. Tito went on. "If by 'that old man' you mean the mad Jacopo di Nola who attempted my life and made a strange accusation against me, of which I told you nothing because it would have alarmed you to no purpose, he, poor wretch, has died in prison. I saw his name in the list of dead."

"I know nothing about his accusation," said Romola. "But I know he is the man whom I saw with the rope round his neck in the Duomo—the man whose portrait Piero di Cosimo painted, grasping your arm as he saw him grasp it the day the French entered, the day you first wore the armour."

"And where is he now, pray?" said Tito, still pale, but governing himself.

"He was lying lifeless in the street from starvation," said Romola. "I revived him with bread and wine. I brought him to our door, but he refused to come in. Then I gave him some money, and he went away without telling me anything. But he had found out that I was your wife. *Who* is he?"

"A man, half mad, half imbecile, who was once

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my father's servant in Greece, and who has a rancorous hatred towards me because I got him dismissed for theft. Now you have the whole mystery, and the further satisfaction of knowing that I am again in danger of assassination. The fact of my wearing the armour, about which you seem to have thought so much, must have led you to infer that I was in danger from this man. Was that the reason you chose to cultivate his acquaintance and invite him into the house?"

Romola was mute. To speak was only like rushing with bare breast against a shield.

Tito moved from his leaning posture, slowly took off his cap and mantle, and pushed back his hair. He was collecting himself for some final words. And Romola stood upright looking at him as she might have looked at some on-coming deadly force, to be met only by silent endurance.

"We need not refer to these matters again, Romola," he said, precisely in the same tone as that in which he had spoken at first. "It is enough if you will remember that the next time your generous ardour leads you to interfere in political affairs, you are likely, not to save any one from danger, but to be raising scaffolds and setting houses on fire. You are not yet a sufficiently ardent Piagnone to believe that Messer Bernardo del Nero is the prince of darkness, and Messer Francesco Valori the archangel Michael. I think I need demand no promise from you?"

"I have understood you too well, Tito."

"It is enough," he said, leaving the room.

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Romola turned round with despair in her face and sank into her seat. "O God, I have tried—I cannot help it. We shall always be divided." Those words passed silently through her mind. "Unless," she said aloud, as if some sudden vision had startled her into speech—"unless misery should come and join us!"

Tito, too, had a new thought in his mind after he had closed the door behind him. With the project of leaving Florence as soon as his life there had become a high enough stepping-stone to a life elsewhere, perhaps at Rome or Milan, there was now for the first time associated a desire to be free from Romola, and to leave her behind him. She had ceased to belong to the desirable furniture of his life: there was no possibility of an easy relation between them without genuineness on his part. Genuineness implied confession of the past, and confession involved a change of purpose. But Tito had as little bent that way as a leopard has to lap milk when its teeth are grown. From all relations that were not easy and agreeable, we know that Tito shrank: why should he cling to them?

And Romola had made his relations difficult with others besides herself. He had had a troublesome interview with Dolfo Spini, who had come back in a rage after an ineffectual soaking with rain and long waiting in ambush, and that scene between Romola and himself at Nello's door, once reported in Spini's ear, might be a seed of something more unmanageable than suspicion. But now, at least, he believed that he had mastered Romola by a

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terror which appealed to the strongest forces of her nature. He had alarmed her affection and her conscience by the shadowy image of consequences; he had arrested her intellect by hanging before it the idea of a hopeless complexity in affairs which defied any moral judgment.

Yet Tito was not at ease. The world was not yet quite cushioned with velvet, and, if it had been, he could not have abandoned himself to that softness with thorough enjoyment; for before he went out again this evening he put on his coat of chain-armour.

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CHAPTER XLIX.

THE PYRAMID OF VANITIES.

THE wintry days passed for Romola as the white ships pass one who is standing lonely on the shore —passing in silence and sameness, yet each bearing a hidden burden of coming change. Tito's hint had mingled so much dread with her interest in the progress of public affairs that she had begun to court ignorance rather than knowledge. The threatening German Emperor was gone again; and, in other ways besides, the position of Florence was alleviated; but so much distress remained that Romola's active duties were hardly diminished, and in these, as usual, her mind found a refuge from its doubt.

She dared not rejoice that the relief which had come in extremity and had appeared to justify the policy of the Frate's party was making that party so triumphant, that Francesco Valori, hot-tempered chieftain of the Piagnoni, had been elected Gonfaloniere at the beginning of the year, and was making haste to have as much of his own liberal way as possible during his two months of power.

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That seemed for the moment like a strengthening of the party most attached to freedom, and a reinforcement of protection to Savonarola; but Romola was now alive to every suggestion likely to deepen her foreboding, that whatever the present might be, it was only an unconscious brooding over the mixed germs of Change which might any day become tragic. And already by Carnival time, a little after mid-February, her presentiment was confirmed by the signs of a very decided change: the Mediceans had ceased to be passive, and were openly exerting themselves to procure the election of Bernardo del Nero as the new Gonfaloniere.

On the last day of the Carnival, between ten and eleven in the morning, Romola walked out, according to promise, towards the Corso degli Albizzi, to fetch her cousin Brigida, that they might both be ready to start from the Via de' Bardi early in the afternoon, and take their places at a window which Tito had had reserved for them in the Piazza della Signoria, where there was to be a scene of so new and striking a sort, that all Florentine eyes must desire to see it. For the Piagnoni were having their own way thoroughly about the mode of keeping the Carnival. In vain Dolfo Spini and his companions had struggled to get up the dear old masques and practical jokes, well spiced with indecency. Such things were not to be in a city where Christ had been declared king.

Romola set out in that languid state of mind with which every one enters on a long day of sight-seeing purely for the sake of gratifying a child, or some

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dear childish friend. The day was certainly an epoch in carnival-keeping; but this phase of reform had not touched her enthusiasm: and she did not know that it was an epoch in her own life when *another* lot would begin to be no longer secretly but visibly entwined with her own.

She chose to go through the great Piazza that she might take a first survey of the unparalleled sight there while she was still alone. Entering it from the south, she saw something monstrous and many-coloured in the shape of a pyramid, or, rather, like a huge fir-tree, sixty feet high, with shelves on the branches, widening and widening towards the base till they reached a circumference of eighty yards. The Piazza was full of life: slight young figures, in white garments, with olive wreaths on their heads, were moving to and fro about the base of the pyramidal tree, carrying baskets full of bright-coloured things; and maturer forms, some in the monastic frock, some in the loose tunics and dark-red caps of artists, were helping and examining, or else retreating to various points in the distance to survey the wondrous whole: while a considerable group, amongst whom Romola recognised Piero di Cosimo, standing on the marble steps of Orgagna's Loggia, seemed to be keeping aloof in discontent and scorn.

Approaching nearer, she paused to look at the multifarious objects ranged in gradation from the base to the summit of the pyramid. There were tapestries and brocades of immodest design, pictures and sculptures held too likely to incite to vice;

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there were boards and tables for all sorts of games, playing-cards along with the blocks for printing them, dice, and other apparatus for gambling; there were worldly music-books, and musical instruments in all the pretty varieties of lute, drum, cymbal, and trumpet; there were masks and masquerading-dresses used in the old Carnival shows; there were handsome copies of Ovid, Boccaccio, Petrarca, Pulci, and other books of a vain or impure sort; there were all the implements of feminine vanity—rouge-pots, false hair, mirrors, perfumes, powders, and transparent veils intended to provoke inquisitive glances: lastly, at the very summit, there was the unflattering effigy of a probably mythical Venetian merchant, who was understood to have offered a heavy sum for this collection of marketable abominations, and, soaring above him in surpassing ugliness, the symbolic figure of the old debauched Carnival.

This was the preparation for a new sort of bonfire —the Burning of Vanities. Hidden in the interior of the pyramid was a plentiful store of dry fuel and gunpowder; and on this last day of the festival, at evening, the pile of vanities was to be set ablaze to the sound of trumpets, and the ugly old Carnival was to tumble into the flames amid the songs of reforming triumph.

This crowning act of the new festivities could hardly have been prepared but for a peculiar organisation which had been started by Savonarola two years before. The mass of the Florentine boyhood and youth was no longer left to its own genial promptings towards street mischief and crude dis-

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soluteness. Under the training of Fra Domenico, a sort of lieutenant to Savonarola, lads and striplings, the hope of Florence, were to have none but pure words on their lips, were to have a zeal for Unseen Good that should put to shame the lukewarmness of their elders, and were to know no pleasures save of an angelic sort — singing divine praises and walking in white robes. It was for them that the ranges of seats had been raised high against the walls of the Duomo; and they had been used to hear Savonarola appeal to them as the future glory of a city specially appointed to do the work of God.

These fresh-cheeked troops were the chief agents in the regenerated merriment of the new Carnival, which was a sort of sacred parody of the old. Had there been bonfires in the old time? There was to be a bonfire now, consuming impurity from off the earth. Had there been symbolic processions? There were to be processions now, but the symbols were to be white robes and red crosses and olive wreaths—emblems of peace and innocent gladness —and the banners and images held aloft were to tell the triumphs of goodness. Had there been dancing in a ring under the open sky of the Piazza, to the sound of choral voices chanting loose songs? There was to be dancing in a ring now, but dancing of monks and laity in fraternal love and divine joy, and the music was to be the music of hymns. As for the collections from street passengers, they were to be greater than ever—not for gross and superfluous suppers, but—for the benefit of the hungry

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and needy; and, besides, there was the collecting of the *Anathema*, or the Vanities to be laid on the great pyramidal bonfire.

Troops of young inquisitors went from house to house on this exciting business of asking that the Anathema should be given up to them. Perhaps, after the more avowed vanities had been surrendered, Madonna, at the head of the household, had still certain little reddened balls brought from the Levant, intended to produce on a sallow cheek a sudden bloom of the most ingenuous falsity? If so, let her bring them down and cast them into the basket of doom. Or, perhaps, she had ringlets and coils of "dead hair?"—if so, let her bring them to the street-door, not on her head, but in her hands, and publicly renounce the Anathema which hid the respectable signs of age under a ghastly mockery of youth. And, in reward, she would hear fresh young voices pronounce a blessing on her and her house.

The beardless inquisitors, organised into little regiments, doubtless took to their work very willingly. To coerce people by shame, or other spiritual pelting, into the giving up of things it will probably vex them to part with, is a form of piety to which the boyish mind is most readily converted; and if some obstinately wicked men got enraged and threatened the whip or the cudgel, this also was exciting. Savonarola himself evidently felt about the training of these boys the difficulty weighing on all minds with noble yearnings towards great ends, yet with that imperfect perception of means which forces a resort to some supernatural constraining influence

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as the only sure hope. The Florentine youth had had very evil habits and foul tongues: it seemed at first an unmixed blessing when they were got to shout "*Viva Gesù!*" But Savonarola was forced at last to say from the pulpit, "There is a little too much shouting of '*Viva Gesù!*' This constant utterance of sacred words brings them into contempt. Let me have no more of that shouting till the next Festa."

Nevertheless, as the long stream of white-robed youthfulness, with its little red crosses and olive wreaths, had gone to the Duomo at dawn this morning to receive the communion from the hands of Savonarola, it was a sight of beauty; and, doubtless, many of those young souls were laying up memories of hope and awe that might save them from ever resting in a merely vulgar view of their work as men and citizens. There is no kind of conscious obedience that is not an advance on lawlessness, and these boys became the generation of men who fought greatly and endured greatly in the last struggle of their Republic. Now, in the intermediate hours between the early communion and dinner-time, they were making their last perambulations to collect alms and vanities, and this was why Romola saw the slim white figures moving to and fro about the base of the great pyramid.

"What think you of this folly, Madonna Romola?" said a brusque voice close to her ear. "Your Piagnoni will make *l'inferno* a pleasant prospect to us, if they are to carry things their own way on earth. It's enough to fetch a cudgel over the mountains to

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see painters, like Lorenzo di Credi and young Baccio there, helping to burn colour out of life in this fashion."

"My good Piero," said Romola, looking up and smiling at the grim man, "even you must be glad to see some of these things burnt. Look at those gewgaws and wigs and rouge-pots: I have heard you talk as indignantly against those things as Fra Girolamo himself."

"What then?" said Piero, turning round on her sharply. "I never said a woman should make a black patch of herself against the background. Va! Madonna Antigone, it's a shame for a woman with your hair and shoulders to run into such nonsense —leave it to women who are not worth painting. What! the most holy Virgin herself has always been dressed well; that's the doctrine of the Church:—talk of heresy, indeed! And I should like to know what the excellent Messer Bardo would have said to the burning of the divine poets by these Frati, who are no better an imitation of men than if they were onions with the bulbs uppermost. Look at that Petrarca sticking up beside a rouge-pot: do the idiots pretend that the heavenly Laura was a painted harridan? And Boccaccio, now: do you mean to say, Madonna Romola—you who are fit to be a model for a wise Saint Catherine of Egypt—do you mean to say you have never read the stories of the immortal Messer Giovanni?"

"It is true I have read them, Piero," said Romola. "Some of them a great many times over, when I was

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a little girl. I used to get the book down when my father was asleep, so that I could read to myself."

"*Ebbene?*" said Piero, in a fiercely challenging tone.

"There are some things in them I do not want ever to forget," said Romola; "but you must confess, Piero, that a great many of those stories are only about low deceit for the lowest ends. Men do not want books to make them think lightly of vice, as if life were a vulgar joke. And I cannot blame Fra Girolamo for teaching that we owe our time to something better."

"Yes, yes, it's very well to say so now you've read them," said Piero, bitterly, turning on his heel and walking away from her.

Romola, too, walked on, smiling at Piero's innuendo, with a sort of tenderness towards the old painter's anger, because she knew that her father would have felt something like it. For herself, she was conscious of no inward collision with the strict and sombre view of pleasure which tended to repress poetry in the attempt to repress vice. Sorrow and joy have each their peculiar narrowness; and a religious enthusiasm like Savonarola's which ultimately blesses mankind by giving the soul a strong propulsion towards sympathy with pain, indignation against wrong, and the subjugation of sensual desire, must always incur the reproach of a great negation. Romola's life had given her an affinity for sadness which inevitably made her unjust towards merriment. That subtle result of culture which we call

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Taste was subdued by the need for deeper motive; just as the nicer demands of the palate are annihilated by urgent hunger. Moving habitually amongst scenes of suffering, and carrying woman's heaviest disappointment in her heart, the severity which allied itself with self-renouncing beneficent strength had no dissonance for her.

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CHAPTER L.

TESSA ABROAD AND AT HOME.

ANOTHER figure easily recognised by us—a figure not clad in black, but in the old red, green, and white—was approaching the Piazza that morning to see the Carnival. She came from an opposite point, for Tessa no longer lived on the hill of San Giorgio. After what had happened there with Baldassarre, Tito had thought it best for that and other reasons to find her a new home, but still in a quiet airy quarter, in a house bordering on the wide garden grounds north of the Porta Santa Croce.

Tessa was not come out sight-seeing without special leave. Tito had been with her the evening before, and she had kept back the entreaty which she felt to be swelling her heart and throat until she saw him in a state of radiant ease, with one arm round the sturdy Lillo, and the other resting gently on her own shoulder as she tried to make the tiny Ninna steady on her legs. She was sure then that the weariness with which he had come in and flung himself into his chair had quite melted away from

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his brow and lips. Tessa had not been slow at learning a few small stratagems by which she might avoid vexing Naldo and yet have a little of her own way. She could read nothing else, but she had learned to read a good deal in her husband's face.

And certainly the charm of that bright, gentle-humoured Tito who woke up under the Loggia de' Cerchi on a Lenten morning five years before, not having yet given any hostages to deceit, never returned so nearly as in the person of Naldo, seated in that straight-backed, carved arm-chair which he had provided for his comfort when he came to see Tessa and the children. Tito himself was surprised at the growing sense of relief which he felt in these moments. No guile was needed towards Tessa: she was too ignorant and too innocent to suspect him of anything. And the little voices calling him "Babbo" were very sweet in his ears for the short while that he heard them. When he thought of leaving Florence, he never thought of leaving Tessa and the little ones behind. He was very fond of these round-cheeked, wide-eyed human things that clung about him and knew no evil of him. And wherever affection can spring, it is like the green leaf and the blossom—pure, and breathing purity, whatever soil it may grow in. Poor Romola, with all her self-sacrificing effort, was really helping to harden Tito's nature by chilling it with a positive dislike which had beforehand seemed impossible in him; but Tessa kept open the fountains of kindness.

"Ninna is very good without me now," began Tessa, feeling her request rising very high in her

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throat, and letting Ninna seat herself on the floor. "I can leave her with Monna Lisa any time, and if she is in the cradle and cries, Lillo is as sensible as can be—he goes and thumps Monna Lisa."

Lillo, whose great dark eyes looked all the darker because his curls were of a light brown like his mother's, jumped off Babbo's knee, and went forthwith to attest his intelligence by thumping Monna Lisa, who was shaking her head slowly over her spinning at the other end of the room.

"A wonderful boy!" said Tito, laughing.

"Isn't he?" said Tessa, eagerly, getting a little closer to him; "and I might go and see the Carnival to-morrow, just for an hour or two, mightn't I?"

"Oh, you wicked pigeon!" said Tito, pinching her cheek; "those are your longings, are they? What have you to do with carnivals now you are an old woman with two children?"

"But old women like to see things," said Tessa, her lower lip hanging a little. "Monna Lisa said she should like to go, only she's so deaf she can't hear what is behind her, and she thinks we couldn't take care of both the children."

"No, indeed, Tessa," said Tito, looking rather grave, "you must not think of taking the children into the crowded streets, else I shall be angry."

"But I have never been into the Piazza without leave," said Tessa, in a frightened, pleading tone, "since the Holy Saturday, and I think Nofri is dead, for you know the poor *madre* died; and I shall never forget the Carnival I saw once; it was so pretty—all roses and a king and queen under them

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—and singing. I liked it better than the San Giovanni."

"But there's nothing like that now, my Tessa. They are going to make a bonfire in the Piazza—that's all. But I cannot let you go out by yourself in the evening."

"Oh no, no! I don't want to go in the evening. I only want to go and see the procession by daylight. There *will* be a procession—is it not true?"

"Yes, after a sort," said Tito, "as lively as a flight of cranes. You must not expect roses and glittering kings and queens, my Tessa. However, I suppose any string of people to be called a procession will please your blue eyes. And there's a thing they have raised in the Piazza de' Signori for the bonfire. You may like to see that. But come home early, and look like a grave little old woman; and if you see any men with feathers and swords, keep out of their way: they are very fierce, and like to cut old women's heads off."

"Santa Madonna! where do they come from? Ah! you are laughing; it is not so bad. But I will keep away from them. Only," Tessa went on in a whisper, putting her lips near Naldo's ear, "if I might take Lillo with me! He is very sensible."

"But who will thump Monna Lisa then, if she doesn't hear?" said Tito, finding it difficult not to laugh, but thinking it necessary to look serious. "No, Tessa, you could not take care of Lillo if you got into a crowd, and he's too heavy for you to carry him."

"It is true," said Tessa, rather sadly, "and he likes to run away. I forgot that. Then I will go

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alone. But now look at Ninna — you have not looked at her enough."

Ninna was a blue-eyed thing, at the tottering, tumbling age—a fair solid, which, like a loaded die, found its base with a constancy that warranted prediction. Tessa went to snatch her up, and when Babbo was paying due attention to the recent teeth and other marvels, she said, in a whisper, "And shall I buy some confetti for the children?"

Tito drew some small coins from his scarsella, and poured them into her palm.

"That will buy no end," said Tessa, delighted at this abundance. "I shall not mind going without Lillo so much, if I bring him something."

So Tessa set out in the morning towards the great Piazza where the bonfire was to be. She did not think the February breeze cold enough to demand further covering than her green woollen dress. A mantle would have been oppressive, for it would have hidden a new necklace and a new clasp, mounted with silver, the only ornamental presents Tito had ever made her. Tessa did not think at all of showing her figure, for no one had ever told her it was pretty; but she was quite sure that her necklace and clasp were of the prettiest sort ever worn by the richest contadina, and she arranged her white hood over her head so that the front of her necklace might be well displayed. These ornaments, she considered, must inspire respect for her as the wife of some one who could afford to buy them.

She tripped along very cheerily in the February sunshine, thinking much of the purchases for the

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little ones, with which she was to fill her small basket, and not thinking at all of any one who might be observing her. Yet her descent from her upper storey into the street had been watched, and she was being kept in sight as she walked by a person who had often waited in vain to see if it were not Tessa who lived in that house to which he had more than once dogged Tito. Baldassarre was carrying a package of yarn: he was constantly employed in that way, as a means of earning his scanty bread, and keeping the sacred fire of vengeance alive; and he had come out of his way this morning, as he had often done before, that he might pass by the house to which he had followed Tito in the evening. His long imprisonment had so intensified his timid suspicion and his belief in some diabolic fortune favouring Tito, that he had not dared to pursue him, except under cover of a crowd or of the darkness; he felt, with instinctive horror, that if Tito's eyes fell upon him, he should again be held up to obloquy, again be dragged away; his weapon would be taken from him, and he should be cast helpless into a prison-cell. His fierce purpose had become as stealthy as a serpent's, which depends for its prey on one dart of the fang. Justice was weak and unfriended; and he could not hear again the voice that pealed the promise of vengeance in the Duomo; he had been there again and again, but that voice, too, had apparently been stifled by cunning strong-armed wickedness. For a long while, Baldassarre's ruling thought was to ascertain whether Tito still wore the armour, for now at last his fainting hope would

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have been contented with a successful stab on this side the grave; but he would never risk his precious knife again. It was a weary time he had had to wait for the chance of answering this question by touching Tito's back in the press of the street. Since then, the knowledge that the sharp steel was useless, and that he had no hope but in some new device, had fallen with leaden weight on his enfeebled mind. A dim vision of winning one of those two wives to aid him came before him continually, and continually slid away. The wife who had lived on the hill was no longer there. If he could find her again, he might grasp some thread of a project, and work his way to more clearness.

And this morning he had succeeded. He was quite certain now where this wife lived, and as he walked, bent a little under his burden of yarn, yet keeping the green and white figure in sight, his mind was dwelling upon her and her circumstances as feeble eyes dwell on lines and colours, trying to interpret them into consistent significance.

Tessa had to pass through various long streets without seeing any other sign of the Carnival than unusual groups of the country people in their best garments, and that disposition in everybody to chat and loiter which marks the early hours of a holiday, before the spectacle has begun. Presently, in her disappointed search for remarkable objects, her eyes fell on a man with a pedlar's basket before him, who seemed to be selling nothing but little red crosses to all the passengers. A little red cross would be pretty to hang up over her bed; it would also help

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to keep off harm, and would perhaps make Ninna stronger. Tessa went to the other side of the street that she might ask the pedlar the price of the crosses, fearing that they would cost a little too much for her to spare from her purchase of sweets. The pedlar's back had been turned towards her hitherto, but when she came near him she recognised an old acquaintance of the Mercato, Bratti Ferravecchi, and, accustomed to feel that she was to avoid old acquaintances, she turned away again and passed to the other side of the street. But Bratti's eye was too well practised in looking out at the corner after possible customers, for her movement to have escaped him, and she was presently arrested by a tap on the arm from one of the red crosses.

"Young woman," said Bratti, as she unwillingly turned her head, "you come from some castello a good way off, it seems to me, else you'd never think of walking about, this blessed Carnival, without a red cross in your hand. Santa Madonna! Four white quattrini is a small price to pay for your soul —prices rise in purgatory, let me tell you."

"Oh, I should like one," said Tessa, hastily, "but I couldn't spare four white quattrini."

Bratti had at first regarded Tessa too abstractedly as a mere customer to look at her with any scrutiny, but when she began to speak he exclaimed, "By the head of San Giovanni, it must be the little Tessa, and looking as fresh as a ripe apple! What! you've done none the worse, then, for running away from father Nofri? You were in the right of it, for he goes on crutches now, and a crabbed fellow with

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crutches is dangerous; he can reach across the house and beat a woman as he sits."

"I'm married," said Tessa, rather demurely, remembering Naldo's command that she should behave with gravity; "and my husband takes great care of me."

"Ah, then, you've fallen on your feet! Nofri said you were good-for-nothing vermin; but what then? An ass may bray a good while before he shakes the stars down. I always said you did well to run away, and it isn't often Bratti's in the wrong. Well, and so you've got a husband and plenty of money? Then you'll never think much of giving four white quattrini for a red cross. I get no profit; but what with the famine and the new religion, all other merchandise is gone down. You live in the country where the chestnuts are plenty, eh? You've never wanted for polenta, I can see."

"No, I've never wanted anything," said Tessa, still on her guard.

"Then you can afford to buy a cross. I got a Padre to bless them, and you get blessing and all for four quattrini. It isn't for the profit; I hardly get a danaro by the whole lot. But then they're holy wares, and it's getting harder and harder work to see your way to Paradise: the very Carnival is like Holy Week, and the least you can do to keep the Devil from getting the upper hand is to buy a cross. God guard you! think what the Devil's tooth is! You've seen him biting the man in San Giovanni, I should hope?"

Tessa felt much teased and frightened. "Oh,

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Bratti," she said, with a discomposed face, "I want to buy a great many confetti: I've got little Lillo and Ninna at home. And nice coloured sweet things cost a great deal. And they will not like the cross so well, though I know it would be good to have it."

"Come, then," said Bratti, fond of laying up a store of merits by imagining possible extortions and then heroically renouncing them, "since you're an old acquaintance, you shall have it for two quattrini. It's making you a present of the cross, to say nothing of the blessing."

Tessa was reaching out her two quattrini with trembling hesitation, when Bratti said abruptly, "Stop a bit! Where do you live?"

"Oh, a long way off," she answered, almost automatically, being preoccupied with her quattrini; "beyond San Ambrogio, in the Via Piccola, at the top of the house where the wood is stacked below."

"Very good," said Bratti, in a patronising tone; "then I'll let you have the cross on trust, and call for the money. So you live inside the gates? Well, well, I shall be passing."

"No, no!" said Tessa, frightened lest Naldo should be angry at this revival of an old acquaintance. "I can spare the money. Take it now."

"No," said Bratti, resolutely; "I'm not a hard-hearted pedlar. I'll call and see if you've got any rags, and you shall make a bargain. See, here's the cross: and there's Pippo's shop not far behind you: you can go and fill your basket, and I must go and get mine empty. *Addio, piccina.*"

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Bratti went on his way, and Tessa, stimulated to change her money into confetti before further accident, went into Pippo's shop, a little fluttered by the thought that she had let Bratti know more about her than her husband would approve. There were certainly more dangers in coming to see the Carnival than in staying at home; and she would have felt this more strongly if she had known that the wicked old man, who had wanted to kill her husband on the hill, was still keeping her in sight. But she had not noticed the man with the burden on his back.

The consciousness of having a small basketful of things to make the children glad, dispersed her anxiety, and as she entered the Via de' Libraj her face had its usual expression of childlike content. And now she thought there was really a procession coming, for she saw white robes and a banner, and her heart began to palpitate with expectation. She stood a little aside, but in that narrow street there was the pleasure of being obliged to look very close. The banner was pretty: it was the Holy Mother with the Babe, whose love for her Tessa had believed in more and more since she had had her babies; and the figures in white had not only green wreaths on their heads, but little red crosses by their side, which caused her some satisfaction that she also had her red cross. Certainly, they looked as beautiful as the angels on the clouds, and to Tessa's mind they too had a background of cloud, like everything else that came to her in life. How and whence did they come? She did not mind

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much about knowing. But one thing surprised her as newer than wreaths and crosses; it was that some of the white figures carried baskets between them. What could the baskets be for?

But now they were very near, and, to her astonishment, they wheeled aside and came straight up to her. She trembled as she would have done if St Michael in the picture had shaken his head at her, and was conscious of nothing but terrified wonder till she saw close to her a round boyish face, lower than her own, and heard a treble voice saying, "Sister, you carry the Anathema about you. Yield it up to the blessed Gesù, and He will adorn you with the gems of His grace."

Tessa was only more frightened, understanding nothing. Her first conjecture settled on her basket of sweets. They wanted that, these alarming angels. Oh dear, dear! She looked down at it.

"No, sister," said a taller youth, pointing to her necklace and the clasp of her belt, "it is those vanities that are the Anathema. Take off that necklace and unclasp that belt, that they may be burned in the holy Bonfire of Vanities, and save *you* from burning."

"It is the truth, my sister," said a still taller youth, evidently the archangel of this band. "Listen to these voices speaking the divine message. You already carry a red cross: let that be your only adornment. Yield up your necklace and belt, and you shall obtain grace."

This was too much. Tessa, overcome with awe, dared not say "no," but she was equally unable to

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render up her beloved necklace and clasp. Her pouting lips were quivering, the tears rushed to her eyes, and a great drop fell. For a moment she ceased to see anything; she felt nothing but confused terror and misery. Suddenly a gentle hand was laid on her arm, and a soft, wonderful voice, as if the Holy Madonna were speaking, said, "Do not be afraid; no one shall harm you."

Tessa looked up and saw a lady in black, with a young heavenly face and loving hazel eyes. She had never seen any one like this lady before, and under other circumstances might have had awe-struck thoughts about her; but now everything else was overcome by the sense that loving protection was near her. The tears only fell the faster, relieving her swelling heart, as she looked up at the heavenly face, and, putting her hand to her necklace, said sobbingly—

"I can't give them to be burnt. My husband—he bought them for me—and they are so pretty—and Ninna—oh, I wish I'd never come!"

"Do not ask her for them," said Romola, speaking to the white-robed boys in a tone of mild authority. "It answers no good end for people to give up such things against their will. That is not what Fra Girolamo approves: he would have such things given up freely."

Madonna Romola's word was not to be resisted, and the white train moved on. They even moved with haste, as if some new object had caught their eyes; and Tessa felt with bliss that they were gone, and that her necklace and clasp were still with her.

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"Oh, I will go back to the house," she said, still agitated; "I will go nowhere else. But if I should meet them again, and you not be there?" she added, expecting everything from this heavenly lady.

"Stay a little," said Romola. "Come with me under this doorway, and we will hide the necklace and clasp, and then you will be in no danger."

She led Tessa under the archway, and said, "Now, can we find room for your necklace and belt in your basket? Ah! your basket is full of crisp things that will break: let us be careful, and lay the heavy necklace under them."

It was like a change in a dream to Tessa—the escape from nightmare into floating safety and joy—to find herself taken care of by this lady, so lovely, and powerful, and gentle. She let Romola unfasten her necklace and clasp, while she herself did nothing but look up at the face that bent over her.

"They are sweets for Lillo and Ninna," she said, as Romola carefully lifted up the light parcels in the basket, and placed the ornaments below them.

"Those are your children?" said Romola, smiling. "And you would rather go home to them than see any more of the Carnival? Else you have not far to go to the Piazza de' Signori, and there you would see the pile for the great bonfire."

"No, oh no!" said Tessa, eagerly; "I shall never like bonfires again. I will go back."

"You live at some castello, doubtless," said Romola, not waiting for an answer. "Towards which gate do you go?"

"Towards Por' Santa Croce."

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"Come, then," said Romola, taking her by the hand and leading her to the corner of a street nearly opposite. "If you go down there," she said, pausing, "you will soon be in a straight road. And I must leave you now, because some one else expects me. You will not be frightened. Your pretty things are quite safe now. Addio."

"Addio, Madonna," said Tessa, almost in a whisper, not knowing what else it would be right to say; and in an instant the heavenly lady was gone. Tessa turned to catch a last glimpse, but she only saw the tall gliding figure vanish round the projecting stonework. So she went on her way in wonder, longing to be once more safely housed with Monna Lisa, undesirous of carnivals for evermore.

Baldassarre had kept Tessa in sight till the moment of her parting with Romola: then he went away with his bundle of yarn. It seemed to him that he had discerned a clue which might guide him if he could only grasp the necessary details firmly enough. He had seen the two wives together, and the sight had brought to his conceptions that vividness which had been wanting before. His power of imagining facts needed to be reinforced continually by the senses. The tall wife was the noble and rightful wife; she had the blood in her that would be readily kindled to resentment; she would know what scholarship was, and how it might lie locked in by the obstructions of the stricken body, like a treasure buried by earthquake. She could believe him: she would be *inclined* to believe him, if he proved to her that her husband was unfaithful.

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Women cared about that: they would take vengeance for that. If this wife of Tito's loved him, she would have a sense of injury which Baldassarre's mind dwelt on with keen longing, as if it would be the strength of another Will added to his own, the strength of another mind to form devices.

Both these wives had been kind to Baldassarre, and their acts towards him, being bound up with the very image of them, had not vanished from his memory; yet the thought of their pain could not present itself to him as a check. To him it seemed that pain was the order of the world for all except the hard and base. If any were innocent, if any were noble, where could the utmost gladness lie for them? Where it lay for him—in unconquerable hatred and triumphant vengeance. But he must be cautious: he must watch this wife in the Via de' Bardi, and learn more of her; for even here frustration was possible. There was no power for him now but in patience.

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CHAPTER LI.

MONNA BRIGIDA'S CONVERSION.

When Romola said that some one else expected her, she meant her cousin Brigida, but she was far from suspecting how much that good kinswoman was in need of her. Returning together towards the Piazza, they had descried the company of youths coming to a stand before Tessa, and when Romola, having approached near enough to see the simple little contadina's distress, said, "Wait for me a moment, cousin," Monna Brigida said hastily, "Ah, I will not go on: come for me to Boni's shop,—I shall go back there."

The truth was, Monna Brigida had a consciousness on the one hand of certain "vanities" carried on her person, and on the other of a growing alarm lest the Piagnoni should be right in holding that rouge, and false hair, and pearl embroidery, endamaged the soul. Their serious view of things filled the air like an odour; nothing seemed to have exactly the same flavour as it used to have; and there was the dear child Romola, in her youth and

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beauty, leading a life that was uncomfortably suggestive of rigorous demands on woman. A widow at fifty-five whose satisfaction has been largely drawn from what she thinks of her own person, and what she believes others think of it, requires a great fund of imagination to keep her spirits buoyant. And Monna Brigida had begun to have frequent struggles at her toilet. If her soul would prosper better without them, was it really worth while to put on the rouge and the braids? But when she lifted up the hand-mirror and saw a sallow face with baggy cheeks, and crows'-feet that were not to be dissimulated by any simpering of the lips—when she parted her grey hair, and let it lie in simple Piagnone fashion round her face, her courage failed. Monna Berta would certainly burst out laughing at her, and call her an old hag, and as Monna Berta was really only fifty-two, she had a superiority which would make the observation cutting. Every woman who was not a Piagnone would give a shrug at the sight of her, and the men would accost her as if she were their grandmother. Whereas, at fifty-five a woman was not so very old—she only required making up a little. So the rouge and the braids and the embroidered berretta went on again, and Monna Brigida was satisfied with the accustomed effect; as for her neck, if she covered it up, people might suppose it was too old to show, and, on the contrary, with the necklaces round it, it looked better than Monna Berta's. This very day, when she was preparing for the Piagnone Carnival, such a struggle had occurred, and the conflicting fears and longings

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which caused the struggle, caused her to turn back and seek refuge in the druggist's shop rather than encounter the collectors of the Anathema when Romola was not by her side. But Monna Brigida was not quite rapid enough in her retreat. She had been descried, even before she turned away, by the white-robed boys in the rear of those who wheeled round towards Tessa, and the willingness with which Tessa was given up was, perhaps, slightly due to the fact that part of the troop had already accosted a personage carrying more markedly upon her the dangerous weight of the Anathema. It happened that several of this troop were at the youngest age taken into peculiar training; and a small fellow of ten, his olive wreath resting above cherubic cheeks and wide brown eyes, his imagination really possessed with a hovering awe at existence as something in which great consequences impended on being good or bad, his longings nevertheless running in the direction of mastery and mischief, was the first to reach Monna Brigida and place himself across her path. She felt angry, and looked for an open door, but there was not one at hand, and by attempting to escape now, she would only make things worse. But it was not the cherubic-faced young one who first addressed her; it was a youth of fifteen, who held one handle of a wide basket.

"Venerable mother!" he began, "the blessed Jesus commands you to give up the Anathema which you carry upon you. That cap embroidered with pearls, those jewels that fasten up your false hair—let them be given up and sold for the poor;

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and cast the hair itself away from you, as a lie that is only fit for burning. Doubtless, too, you have other jewels under your silk mantle."

"Yes, lady," said the youth at the other handle, who had many of Fra Girolamo's phrases by heart, "they are too heavy for you: they are heavier than a millstone, and are weighting you for perdition. Will you adorn yourself with the hunger of the poor, and be proud to carry God's curse upon your head?"

"In truth you are old, buona madre," said the cherubic boy, in a sweet soprano. "You look very ugly with the red on your cheeks and that black glistening hair, and those fine things. It is only Satan who can like to see you. Your Angel is sorry. He wants you to rub away the red."

The little fellow snatched a soft silk scarf from the basket, and held it towards Monna Brigida, that she might use it as her guardian angel desired. Her anger and mortification were fast giving way to spiritual alarm. Monna Berta and that cloud of witnesses, highly-dressed society in general, were not looking at her, and she was surrounded by young monitors, whose white robes, and wreaths, and red crosses, and dreadful candour, had something awful in their unusualness. Her Franciscan confessor, Fra Cristoforo, of Santa Croce, was not at hand to reinforce her distrust of Dominican teaching, and she was helplessly possessed and shaken by a vague sense that a supreme warning was come to her. Unvisited by the least suggestion of any other course that was open to her, she took the scarf that

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was held out, and rubbed her cheeks, with trembling submissiveness.

"It is well, madonna," said the second youth. "It is a holy beginning. And when you have taken those vanities from your head, the dew of heavenly grace will descend on it." The infusion of mischief was getting stronger, and putting his hand to one of the jewelled pins that fastened her braids to the berretta, he drew it out. The heavy black plait fell down over Monna Brigida's face, and dragged the rest of the head-gear forward. It was a new reason for not hesitating: she put up her hands hastily, undid the other fastenings, and flung down into the basket of doom her beloved crimson-velvet berretta, with all its unsurpassed embroidery of seed-pearls, and stood an unrouged woman, with grey hair pushed backward from a face where certain deep lines of age had triumphed over *embonpoint*.

But the berretta was not allowed to lie in the basket. With impish zeal the youngsters lifted it, and held it up pitilessly, with the false hair dangling.

"See, venerable mother," said the taller youth, "what ugly lies you have delivered yourself from! And now you look like the blessed Saint Anna, the mother of the Holy Virgin."

Thoughts of going into a convent forthwith, and never showing herself in the world again, were rushing through Monna Brigida's mind. There was nothing possible for her but to take care of her soul. Of course, there were spectators laughing: she had no need to look round to assure herself of that.

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Well! it would, perhaps, be better to be forced to think more of Paradise. But at the thought that the dear accustomed world was no longer in her choice, there gathered some of those hard tears which just moisten elderly eyes, and she could see but dimly a large rough hand holding a red cross, which was suddenly thrust before her over the shoulders of the boys, while a strong guttural voice said—

"Only four quattrini, madonna, blessing and all! Buy it. You'll find a comfort in it now your wig's gone. Deh! what are we sinners doing all our lives? Making soup in a basket, and getting nothing but the scum for our stomachs. Better buy a blessing, madonna! Only four quattrini; the profit is not so much as the smell of a danaro, and it goes to the poor."

Monna Brigida, in dim-eyed confusion, was proceeding to the further submission of reaching money from her embroidered scarsella, at present hidden by her silk mantle, when the group round her, which she had not yet entertained the idea of escaping, opened before a figure as welcome as an angel loosing prison-bolts.

"Romola, look at me!" said Monna Brigida, in a piteous tone, putting out both her hands.

The white troop was already moving away, with a slight consciousness that its zeal about the headgear had been superabundant enough to afford a dispensation from any further demand for penitential offerings.

"Dear cousin, don't be distressed," said Romola,

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smitten with pity, yet hardly able to help smiling at the sudden apparition of her kinswoman in a genuine, natural guise, strangely contrasted with all memories of her. She took the black drapery from her own head, and threw it over Monna Brigida's. "There," she went on soothingly, "no one will remark you now. We will turn down the Via del Palagio and go straight to our house."

They hastened away, Monna Brigida grasping Romola's hand tightly, as if to get a stronger assurance of her being actually there.

"Ah, my Romola, my dear child!" said the short fat woman, hurrying with frequent steps to keep pace with the majestic young figure beside her; "what an old scarecrow I am! I must be good—I mean to be good!"

"Yes, yes; buy a cross!" said the guttural voice, while the rough hand was thrust once more before Monna Brigida: for Bratti was not to be abashed by Romola's presence into renouncing a probable customer, and had quietly followed up their retreat. "Only four quattrini, blessing and all—and if there was any profit, it would all go to the poor."

Monna Brigida would have been compelled to pause, even if she had been in a less submissive mood. She put up one hand deprecatingly to arrest Romola's remonstrance, and with the other reached out a grosso, worth many white quattrini, saying, in an entreating tone—

"Take it, good man, and begone."

"You're in the right, madonna," said Bratti, taking the coin quickly, and thrusting the cross into

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her hand; "I'll not offer you change, for I might as well rob you of a mass. What! we must all be scorched a little, but you'll come off the easier; better fall from the window than the roof. A good Easter and a good year to you!"

"Well, Romola," cried Monna Brigida, pathetically, as Bratti left them, "if I'm to be a Piagnone it's no matter how I look!"

"Dear cousin," said Romola, smiling at her affectionately, "you don't know how much better you look than you ever did before. I see now how good-natured your face is, like yourself. That red and finery seemed to thrust themselves forward and hide expression. Ask our Piero or any other painter if he would not rather paint your portrait now than before. I think all lines of the human face have something either touching or grand, unless they seem to come from low passions. How fine old men are, like my godfather! Why should not old women look grand and simple?"

"Yes, when one gets to be sixty, my Romola," said Brigida, relapsing a little; "but I'm only fifty-five, and Monna Berta, and everybody—but it's no use: I will be good, like you. Your mother, if she'd been alive, would have been as old as I am; we were cousins together. One *must* either die or get old. But it doesn't matter about being old, if one's a Piagnone."

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CHAPTER LII.

A PROPHETESS.

THE incidents of that Carnival day seemed to Romola to carry no other personal consequences to her than the new care of supporting poor cousin Brigida in her fluctuating resignation to age and grey hairs; but they introduced a Lenten time in which she was kept at a high pitch of mental excitement and active effort.

Bernardo del Nero had been elected Gonfaloniere. By great exertions the Medicean party had so far triumphed, and that triumph had deepened Romola's presentiment of some secretly-prepared scheme likely to ripen either into success or betrayal during these two months of her godfather's authority. Every morning the dim daybreak as it peered into her room seemed to be that haunting fear coming back to her. Every morning the fear went with her as she passed through the streets on her way to the early sermon in the Duomo: but there she gradually lost the sense of its chill presence, as men lose the dread of death in the clash of battle.

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In the Duomo she felt herself sharing in a passionate conflict which had wider relations than any enclosed within the walls of Florence. For Savonarola was preaching — preaching the last course of Lenten sermons he was ever allowed to finish in the Duomo: he knew that excommunication was imminent, and he had reached the point of defying it. He held up the condition of the Church in the terrible mirror of his unflinching speech, which called things by their right names and dealt in no polite periphrases; he proclaimed with heightening confidence the advent of renovation—of a moment when there would be a general revolt against corruption. As to his own destiny, he seemed to have a double and alternating prevision: sometimes he saw himself taking a glorious part in that revolt, sending forth a voice that would be heard through all Christendom, and making the dead body of the Church tremble into new life, as the body of Lazarus trembled when the Divine voice pierced the sepulchre; sometimes he saw no prospect for himself but persecution and martyrdom:—this life for him was only a vigil, and only after death would come the dawn.

The position was one which must have had its impressiveness for all minds that were not of the dullest order, even if they were inclined, as Machiavelli was, to interpret the Frate's character by a key that presupposed no loftiness. To Romola, whose kindred ardour gave her a firm belief in Savonarola's genuine greatness of purpose, the crisis was as stirring as if it had been part of her personal lot. It blent itself as an exalting memory with all

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her daily labours; and those labours were calling not only for difficult perseverance, but for new courage. Famine had never yet taken its flight from Florence, and all distress, by its long continuance, was getting harder to bear; disease was spreading in the crowded city, and the Plague was expected. As Romola walked, often in weariness, among the sick, the hungry, and the murmuring, she felt it good to be inspired by something more than her pity—by the belief in a heroism struggling for sublime ends, towards which the daily action of her pity could only tend feebly, as the dews that freshen the weedy ground to-day tend to prepare an unseen harvest in the years to come.

But that mighty music which stirred her in the Duomo was not without its jarring notes. Since those first days of glowing hope when the Frate, seeing the near triumph of good in the reform of the Republic and the coming of the French deliverer, had preached peace, charity, and oblivion of political differences, there had been a marked change of conditions: political intrigue had been too obstinate to allow of the desired oblivion; the belief in the French deliverer, who had turned his back on his high mission, seemed to have wrought harm; and hostility, both on a petty and on a grand scale, was attacking the Prophet with new weapons and new determination.

It followed that the spirit of contention and self-vindication pierced more and more conspicuously in his sermons; that he was urged to meet the popular demands not only by increased insistance and detail

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concerning visions and private revelations, but by a tone of defiant confidence against objectors; and from having denounced the desire for the miraculous, and declared that miracles had no relation to true faith, he had come to assert that at the right moment the Divine power would attest the truth of his prophetic preaching by a miracle. And continually, in the rapid transitions of excited feeling, as the vision of triumphant good receded behind the actual predominance of evil, the threats of coming vengeance against vicious tyrants and corrupt priests gathered some impetus from personal exasperation, as well as from indignant zeal.

In the career of a great public orator who yields himself to the inspiration of the moment, that conflict of selfish and unselfish emotion which in most men is hidden in the chamber of the soul, is brought into terrible evidence: the language of the inner voices is written out in letters of fire.

But if the tones of exasperation jarred on Romola, there was often another member of Fra Girolamo's audience to whom they were the only thrilling tones, like the vibration of deep bass notes to the deaf. Baldassarre had found out that the wonderful Frate was preaching again, and as often as he could, he went to hear the Lenten sermon, that he might drink in the threats of a voice which seemed like a power on the side of justice. He went the more because he had seen that Romola went too; for he was waiting and watching for a time when not only outward circumstances, but his own varying mental state, would mark the right moment for seeking an

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interview with her. Twice Romola had caught sight of his face in the Duomo—once when its dark glance was fixed on hers. She wished not to see it again, and yet she looked for it, as men look for the reappearance of a portent. But any revelation that might be yet to come about this old man was a subordinate fear now: it referred, she thought, only to the past, and her anxiety was almost absorbed by the present.

Yet the stirring Lent passed by; April, the second and final month of her godfather's supreme authority, was near its close; and nothing had occurred to fulfil her presentiment. In the public mind, too, there had been fears, and rumours had spread from Rome of a menacing activity on the part of Piero de' Medici; but in a few days the suspected Bernardo would go out of power.

Romola was trying to gather some courage from the review of her futile fears, when on the twenty-seventh, as she was walking out on her usual errands of mercy in the afternoon, she was met by a messenger from Camilla Rucellai, chief among the feminine seers of Florence, desiring her presence forthwith on matters of the highest moment. Romola, who shrank with unconquerable repulsion from the shrill volubility of those illuminated women, and had just now a special repugnance towards Camilla because of a report that she had announced revelations hostile to Bernardo del Nero, was at first inclined to send back a flat refusal. Camilla's message might refer to public affairs, and Romola's immediate prompting was to close her ears against

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knowledge that might only make her mental burden heavier. But it had become so thoroughly her habit to reject her impulsive choice, and to obey passively the guidance of outward claims, that, reproving herself for allowing her presentiments to make her cowardly and selfish, she ended by compliance, and went straight to Camilla.

She found the nervous grey-haired woman in a chamber arranged as much as possible like a convent cell. The thin fingers clutching Romola as she sat, and the eager voice addressing her at first in a loud whisper, caused her a physical shrinking that made it difficult for her to keep her seat.

Camilla had a vision to communicate—a vision in which it had been revealed to her by Romola's Angel, that Romola knew certain secrets concerning her godfather, Bernardo del Nero, which, if disclosed, might save the Republic from peril. Camilla's voice rose louder and higher as she narrated her vision, and ended by exhorting Romola to obey the command of her Angel, and separate herself from the enemy of God.

Romola's impetuosity was that of a massive nature, and, except in moments when she was deeply stirred, her manner was calm and self-controlled. She had a constitutional disgust for the shallow excitability of women like Camilla, whose faculties seemed all wrought up into fantasies, leaving nothing for emotion and thought. The exhortation was not yet ended when she started up and attempted to wrench her arm from Camilla's tighten-

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ing grasp. It was of no use. The prophetess kept her hold like a crab, and, only incited to more eager exhortation by Romola's resistance, was carried beyond her own intention into a shrill statement of other visions which were to corroborate this. Christ himself had appeared to her and ordered her to send his commands to certain citizens in office that they should throw Bernardo del Nero from the window of the Palazzo Vecchio. Fra Girolamo himself knew of it, and had not dared this time to say that the vision was not of Divine authority.

"And since then," said Camilla, in her excited treble, straining upward with wild eyes towards Romola's face, "the Blessed Infant has come to me and laid a wafer of sweetness on my tongue in token of his pleasure that I had done his will."

"Let me go!" said Romola, in a deep voice of anger. "God grant you are mad! else you are detestably wicked!"

The violence of her effort to be free was too strong for Camilla now. She wrenched away her arm and rushed out of the room, not pausing till she had hurriedly gone far along the street, and found herself close to the church of the Badia. She had but to pass behind the curtain under the old stone arch, and she would find a sanctuary shut in from the noise and hurry of the street, where all objects and all uses suggested the thought of an eternal peace subsisting in the midst of turmoil.

She turned in, and sinking down on the step of the altar in front of Filippino Lippi's serene Virgin

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appearing to St Bernard, she waited in hope that the inward tumult which agitated her would by-and-by subside.

The thought which pressed on her the most acutely was that Camilla could allege Savonarola's countenance of her wicked folly. Romola did not for a moment believe that he had sanctioned the throwing of Bernardo del Nero from the window as a Divine suggestion; she felt certain that there was falsehood or mistake in that allegation. Savonarola had become more and more severe in his views of resistance to malcontents; but the ideas of strict law and order were fundamental to all his political teaching. Still, since he knew the possibly fatal effects of visions like Camilla's, since he had a marked distrust of such spirit-seeing women, and kept aloof from them as much as possible, why, with his readiness to denounce wrong from the pulpit, did he not publicly denounce these pretended revelations which brought new darkness instead of light across the conception of a Supreme Will? Why? The answer came with painful clearness: he was fettered inwardly by the consciousness that such revelations were not, in their basis, distinctly separable from his own visions; he was fettered outwardly by the foreseen consequence of raising a cry against himself even among members of his own party, as one who would suppress all Divine inspiration of which he himself was not the vehicle—he or his confidential and supplementary seer of visions, Fra Salvestro.

Romola, kneeling with buried face on the altar-step, was enduring one of those sickening moments,

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when the enthusiasm which had come to her as the only energy strong enough to make life worthy, seemed to be inevitably bound up with vain dreams and wilful eye-shutting. Her mind rushed back with a new attraction towards the strong worldly sense, the dignified prudence, the untheoretic virtues of her godfather, who was to be treated as a sort of Agag because he held that a more restricted form of government was better than the Great Council, and because he would not pretend to forget old ties to the banished family.

But with this last thought rose the presentiment of some plot to restore the Medici; and then again she felt that the popular party was half justified in its fierce suspicion. Again she felt that to keep the Government of Florence pure, and to keep out a vicious rule, was a sacred cause; the Frate was right there, and had carried her understanding irrevocably with him. But at this moment the assent of her understanding went alone; it was given unwillingly. Her heart was recoiling from a right allied to so much narrowness; a right apparently entailing that hard systematic judgment of men which measures them by assents and denials quite superficial to the manhood within them. Her affection and respect were clinging with new tenacity to her godfather, and with him to those memories of her father which were in the same opposition to the division of men into sheep and goats by the easy mark of some political or religious symbol.

After all has been said that can be said about the widening influence of ideas, it remains true that they

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would hardly be such strong agents unless they were taken in a solvent of feeling. The great world-struggle of developing thought is continually foreshadowed in the struggle of the affections, seeking a justification for love and hope.

If Romola's intellect had been less capable of discerning the complexities in human things, all the early loving associations of her life would have forbidden her to accept implicitly the denunciatory exclusiveness of Savonarola. She had simply felt that his mind had suggested deeper and more efficacious truth to her than any other, and the large breathing-room she found in his grand view of human duties had made her patient towards that part of his teaching which she could not absorb, so long as its practical effect came into collision with no strong force in her. But now a sudden insurrection of feeling had brought about that collision. Her indignation, once roused by Camilla's visions, could not pause there, but ran like an illuminating fire over all the kindred facts in Savonarola's teaching, and for the moment she felt what was true in the scornful sarcasms she heard continually flung against him, more keenly than she felt what was false.

But it was an illumination that made all life look ghastly to her. Where were the beings to whom she could cling, with whom she could work and endure, with the belief that she was working for the right? On the side from which moral energy came lay a fanaticism from which she was shrinking with newly-startled repulsion; on the side to which she was drawn by affection and memory, there was the

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presentiment of some secret plotting, which her judgment told her would not be unfairly called crime. And still surmounting every other thought was the dread inspired by Tito's hints, lest that presentiment should be converted into knowledge, in such a way that she would be torn by irreconcilable claims.

Calmness would not come even on the altar-steps; it would not come from looking at the serene picture where the saint, writing in the rocky solitude, was being visited by faces with celestial peace in them. Romola was in the hard press of human difficulties, and that rocky solitude was too far off. She rose from her knees that she might hasten to her sick people in the courtyard, and by some immediate beneficent action, revive that sense of worth in life which at this moment was unfed by any wider faith. But when she turned round, she found herself face to face with a man who was standing only two yards off her. The man was Baldassarre.

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CHAPTER LIII.

ON SAN MINIATO.

"I WOULD speak with you," said Baldassarre, as Romola looked at him in silent expectation. It was plain that he had followed her, and had been waiting for her. She was going at last to know the secret about him.

"Yes," she said, with the same sort of submission that she might have shown under an imposed penance. "But you wish to go where no one can hear us?"

"Where *he* will not come upon us," said Baldassarre, turning and glancing behind him timidly. "Out—in the air—away from the streets."

"I sometimes go to San Miniato at this hour," said Romola. "If you like, I will go now, and you can follow me. It is far, but we can be solitary there."

He nodded assent, and Romola set out. To some women it might have seemed an alarming risk to go to a comparatively solitary spot with a man who had some of the outward signs of that madness which

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Tito attributed to him. But Romola was not given to personal fears, and she was glad of the distance that interposed some delay before another blow fell on her. The afternoon was far advanced, and the sun was already low in the west, when she paused on some rough ground in the shadow of the cypress-trunks, and looked round for Baldassarre. He was not far off, but when he reached her, he was glad to sink down on an edge of stony earth. His thick-set frame had no longer the sturdy vigour which belonged to it when he first appeared with the rope round him in the Duomo; and under the transient tremor caused by the exertion of walking up the hill, his eyes seemed to have a more helpless vagueness.

"The hill is steep," said Romola, with compassionate gentleness, seating herself by him. "And I fear you have been weakened by want?"

He turned his head and fixed his eyes on her in silence, unable, now the moment of speech was come, to seize the words that would convey the thought he wanted to utter: and she remained as motionless as she could, lest he should suppose her impatient. He looked like nothing higher than a common-bred, neglected old man; but she was used now to be very near to such people, and to think a great deal about their troubles. Gradually his glance gathered a more definite expression, and at last he said with abrupt emphasis—

"Ah! you would have been my daughter!"

The swift flush came in Romola's face and went back again as swiftly, leaving her with white lips a

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little apart, like a marble image of horror. For her mind, the revelation was made. She divined the facts that lay behind that single word, and in the first moment there could be no check to the impulsive belief which sprang from her keen experience of Tito's nature. The sensitive response of her face was a stimulus to Baldassarre; for the first time his words had wrought their right effect. He went on with gathering eagerness and firmness, laying his hand on her arm.

"You are a woman of proud blood—is it not true? You go to hear the preacher; you hate baseness—baseness that smiles and triumphs. You hate your husband?"

"Oh God! were you really his father?" said Romola, in a low voice, too entirely possessed by the images of the past to take any note of Baldassarre's question. "Or was it as he said? Did you take him when he was little?"

"Ah, you believe me—you know what he is!" said Baldassarre, exultingly, tightening the pressure on her arm, as if the contact gave him power. "You will help me?"

"Yes," said Romola, not interpreting the words as he meant them. She laid her palm gently on the rough hand that grasped her arm, and the tears came to her eyes as she looked at him. "Oh, it is piteous! Tell me—you were a great scholar; you taught him. *How* is it?"

She broke off. Tito's allegation of this man's madness had come across her; and where were the signs even of past refinement? But she had the

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self-command not to move her hand. She sat perfectly still, waiting to listen with new caution.

"It is gone!—it is all gone!" said Baldassarre; "and they would not believe me, because he lied, and said I was mad; and they had me dragged to prison. And I am old—my mind will not come back. And the world is against me."

He paused a moment, and his eyes sank as if he were under a wave of despondency. Then he looked up at her again, and said with renewed eagerness—

"But *you* are not against me. He made you love him, and he has been false to you; and you hate him. Yes, he made *me* love him: he was beautiful and gentle, and I was a lonely man. I took him when they were beating him. He slept in my bosom when he was little, and I watched him as he grew, and gave him all my knowledge, and everything that was mine I meant to be his. I had many things; money, and books, and gems. He had my gems—he sold them; and he left me in slavery. He never came to seek me, and when I came back poor and in misery, he denied me. He said I was a madman."

"He told us his father was dead—was drowned," said Romola, faintly. "Surely he must have believed it then. Oh! he could not have been so base *then!*"

A vision had risen of what Tito was to her in those first days when she thought no more of wrong in him than a child thinks of poison in flowers. The yearning regret that lay in that memory brought some relief from the tension of horror. With one great sob the tears rushed forth.

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"Ah, you are young, and the tears come easily," said Baldassarre, with some impatience. "But tears are no good; they only put out the fire within, and it is the fire that works. Tears will hinder us. Listen to me."

Romola turned towards him with a slight start. Again the possibility of his madness had darted through her mind, and checked the rush of belief. If, after all, this man were only a mad assassin? But her deep belief in this story still lay behind, and it was more in sympathy than in fear that she avoided the risk of paining him by any show of doubt.

"Tell me," she said, as gently as she could, "how did you lose your memory — your scholarship."

"I was ill. I can't tell how long—it was a blank. I remember nothing, only at last I was sitting in the sun among the stones, and everything else was darkness. And slowly, and by degrees, I felt something besides that: a longing for something—I did not know what—that never came. And when I was in the ship on the waters I began to know what I longed for; it was for the Boy to come back—it was to find all my thoughts again, for I was locked away outside them all. And I am outside now. I feel nothing but a wall and darkness."

Baldassarre had become dreamy again, and sank into silence, resting his head between his hands; and again Romola's belief in him had submerged all cautioning doubts. The pity with which she dwelt on his words seemed like the revival of an

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old pang. Had she not daily seen how her father missed Dino and the future he had dreamed of in that son?

"It all came back once," Baldassarre went on presently. "I was master of everything. I saw all the world again, and my gems, and my books; and I thought I had him in my power, and I went to expose him where—where the lights were and the trees; and he lied again, and said I was mad, and they dragged me away to prison. . . . Wickedness is strong; and he wears armour."

The fierceness had flamed up again. He spoke with his former intensity, and again he grasped Romola's arm.

"But you will help me? He has been false to you too. He has another wife, and she has children. He makes her believe he is her husband, and she is a foolish, helpless thing. I will show you where she lives."

The first shock that passed through Romola was visibly one of anger. The woman's sense of indignity was inevitably foremost. Baldassarre instinctively felt her in sympathy with him.

"You hate him," he went on. "Is it not true? There is no love between you; I know that. I know women can hate; and you have proud blood. You hate falseness, and you can love revenge."

Romola sat paralysed by the shock of conflicting feelings. She was not conscious of the grasp that was bruising her tender arm.

"You shall contrive it," said Baldassarre, presently, in an eager whisper. "I have learned by

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heart that you are his rightful wife. You are a noble woman. You go to hear the preacher of vengeance; you will help justice. But you will think for me. My mind goes — everything goes sometimes—all but the fire. The fire is God: it is justice: it will not die. You believe that—is it not true? If they will not hang him for robbing me, you will take away his armour—you will make him go without it, and I will stab him. I have a knife, and my arm is still strong enough."

He put his hand under his tunic, and reached out the hidden knife, feeling the edge abstractedly, as if he needed the sensation to keep alive his ideas.

It seemed to Romola as if every fresh hour of her life were to become more difficult than the last. Her judgment was too vigorous and rapid for her to fall into the mistake of using futile deprecatory words to a man in Baldassarre's state of mind. She chose not to answer his last speech. She would win time for his excitement to allay itself by asking something else that she cared to know. She spoke rather tremulously—

"You say she is foolish and helpless—that other wife — and believes him to be her real husband. Perhaps he is: perhaps he married her before he married me."

"I cannot tell," said Baldassarre, pausing in that action of feeling the knife, and looking bewildered. "I can remember no more. I only know where she lives. You shall see her. I will take you; but not now," he added hurriedly, "*he* may be there. The night is coming on."

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"It is true," said Romola, starting up with a sudden consciousness that the sun had set and the hills were darkening; "but you will come and take me—when?"

"In the morning," said Baldassarre, dreaming that she, too, wanted to hurry to her vengeance.

"Come to me, then, where you came to me to-day, in the church. I will be there at ten; and if you are not there, I will go again towards mid-day. Can you remember?"

"Mid-day," said Baldassarre—"only mid-day. The same place, and mid-day. And, after that," he added, rising and grasping her arm again with his left hand, while he held the knife in his right; "we will have our revenge. He shall feel the sharp edge of justice. The world is against me, but you will help me."

"I would help you in other ways," said Romola, making a first, timid effort to dispel his illusion about her. "I fear you are in want; you have to labour, and get little. I should like to bring you comforts, and make you feel again that there is some one who cares for you."

"Talk no more about that," said Baldassarre, fiercely. "I will have nothing else. Help me to wring one drop of vengeance on this side of the grave. I have nothing but my knife. It is sharp; but there is a moment after the thrust when men see the face of death,—and it shall be *my* face that he will see."

He loosed his hold, and sank down again in a sitting posture. Romola felt helpless: she must defer all intentions till the morrow.

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"Mid-day, then," she said, in a distinct voice.

"Yes," he answered, with an air of exhaustion. "Go; I will rest here."

She hastened away. Turning at the last spot whence he was likely to be in sight, she saw him seated still.

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CHAPTER LIV.

THE EVENING AND THE MORNING.

Romola had a purpose in her mind as she was hastening away; a purpose which had been growing through the afternoon hours like a side-stream, rising higher and higher along with the main current. It was less a resolve than a necessity of her feeling. Heedless of the darkening streets, and not caring to call for Maso's slow escort, she hurried across the bridge where the river showed itself black before the distant dying red, and took the most direct way to the Old Palace. She might encounter her husband there. No matter. She could not weigh probabilities; she must discharge her heart. She did not know what she passed in the pillared court or up the wide stairs; she only knew that she asked an usher for the Gonfaloniere, giving her name, and begging to be shown into a private room.

She was not left long alone with the frescoed figures and the newly-lit tapers. Soon the door

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opened, and Bernardo del Nero entered, still carrying his white head erect above his silk lucco.

"Romola, my child, what is this?" he said, in a tone of anxious surprise as he closed the door.

She had uncovered her head and went towards him without speaking. He laid his hand on her shoulder, and held her a little way from him that he might see her better. Her face was haggard from fatigue and long agitation, her hair had rolled down in disorder; but there was an excitement in her eyes that seemed to have triumphed over the bodily consciousness.

"What has he done?" said Bernardo, abruptly. "Tell me everything, child; throw away pride. I am your father."

"It is not about myself—nothing about myself," said Romola, hastily. "Dearest godfather, it is about you. I have heard things—some I cannot tell you. But you are in danger in the palace; you are in danger everywhere. There are fanatical men who would harm you, and—and there are traitors. Trust nobody. If you trust, you will be betrayed."

Bernardo smiled.

"Have you worked yourself up into this agitation, my poor child," he said, raising his hand to her head and patting it gently, "to tell such old truth as that to an old man like me?"

"Oh no, no! they are not old truths that I mean," said Romola, pressing her clasped hands painfully together, as if that action would help her to suppress what must not be told. "They are fresh things that I know, but cannot tell. Dearest godfather,

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you know I am not foolish. I would not come to you without reason. Is it too late to warn you against any one, *every* one who seems to be working on your side? Is it too late to say, 'Go to your villa and keep away in the country when these three more days of office are over?' Oh God! perhaps it is too late! and if any harm comes to you, it will be as if I had done it!"

The last words had burst from Romola involuntarily: a long-stifled feeling had found spasmodic utterance. But she herself was startled and arrested.

"I mean," she added, hesitatingly, "I know nothing positive. I only know what fills me with fears."

"Poor child!" said Bernardo, looking at her with quiet penetration for a moment or two. Then he said: "Go, Romola—go home and rest. These fears may be only big ugly shadows of something very little and harmless. Even traitors must see their interest in betraying; the rats will run where they smell the cheese, and there is no knowing yet which way the scent will come."

He paused, and turned away his eyes from her with an air of abstraction, till, with a slow shrug, he added—

"As for warnings, they are of no use to me, child. I enter into no plots, but I never forsake my colours. If I march abreast with obstinate men, who will rush on guns and pikes, I must share the consequences. Let us say no more about that. I have not many years left at the bottom of my sack for them to rob me of. Go, child; go home and rest."

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He put his hand on her head again caressingly, and she could not help clinging to his arm, and pressing her brow against his shoulder. Her godfather's caress seemed the last thing that was left to her out of that young filial life, which now looked so happy to her even in its troubles, for they were troubles untainted by anything hateful.

"Is silence best, my Romola?" said the old man.

"Yes, now; but I cannot tell whether it always will be," she answered, hesitatingly, raising her head with an appealing look.

"Well, you have a father's ear while I am above ground"—he lifted the black drapery and folded it round her head, adding—"and a father's home; remember that." Then opening the door, he said: "There, hasten away. You are like a black ghost; you will be safe enough."

When Romola fell asleep that night, she slept deep. Agitation had reached its limits; she must gather strength before she could suffer more; and, in spite of rigid habit, she slept on far beyond sunrise.

When she awoke, it was to the sound of guns. Piero de' Medici, with thirteen hundred men at his back, was before the gate that looks towards Rome.

So much Romola learned from Maso, with many circumstantial additions of dubious quality. A countryman had come in and alarmed the Signoria before it was light, else the city would have been taken by surprise. His master was not in the house, having been summoned to the Palazzo long ago. She sent out the old man again, that he might gather news,

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while she went up to the loggia from time to time to try and discern any signs of the dreaded entrance having been made, or of its having been effectively repelled. Maso brought her word that the great Piazza was full of armed men, and that many of the chief citizens suspected as friends of the Medici had been summoned to the palace and detained there. Some of the people seemed not to mind whether Piero got in or not, and some said the Signoria itself had invited him; but however that might be, they were giving him an ugly welcome; and the soldiers from Pisa were coming against him.

In her memory of those morning hours, there were not many things that Romola could distinguish as actual external experiences standing markedly out above the tumultuous waves of retrospect and anticipation. She knew that she had really walked to the Badia by the appointed time in spite of street alarms; she knew that she had waited there in vain. And the scene she had witnessed when she came out of the church, and stood watching on the steps while the doors were being closed behind her for the afternoon interval, always came back to her like a remembered waking.

There was a change in the faces and tones of the people, armed and unarmed, who were pausing or hurrying along the streets. The guns were firing again, but the sound only provoked laughter. She soon knew the cause of the change. Piero de' Medici and his horsemen had turned their backs on Florence, and were galloping as fast as they could along the Siena road. She learned this from a substantial

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shopkeeping Piagnone, who had not yet laid down his pike.

"It is true," he ended, with a certain bitterness in his emphasis. "Piero is gone, but there are those left behind who were in the secret of his coming—we all know that; and if the new Signoria does its duty we shall soon know *who* they are."

The words darted through Romola like a sharp spasm; but the evil they foreshadowed was not yet close upon her, and as she entered her home again, her most pressing anxiety was the possibility that she had lost sight for a long while of Baldassarre.

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CHAPTER LV.

WAITING.

The lengthening sunny days went on without bringing either what Romola most desired or what she most dreaded. They brought no sign from Baldassarre, and, in spite of special watch on the part of the Government, no revelation of the suspected conspiracy. But they brought other things which touched her closely, and bridged the phantom-crowded space of anxiety with active sympathy in immediate trial. They brought the spreading Plague and the Excommunication of Savonarola.

Both these events tended to arrest her incipient alienation from the Frate, and to rivet again her attachment to the man who had opened to her the new life of duty, and who seemed now to be worsted in the fight for principle against profligacy. For Romola could not carry from day to day into the abodes of pestilence and misery the sublime excitement of a gladness that, since such anguish existed, she too existed to make some of the anguish less bitter, without remembering that she owed this

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transcendent moral life to Fra Girolamo. She could not witness the silencing and excommunication of a man whose distinction from the great mass of the clergy lay, not in any heretical belief, not in his superstitions, but in the energy with which he sought to make the Christian life a reality, without feeling herself drawn strongly to his side.

Far on in the hot days of June the Excommunication, for some weeks arrived from Rome, was solemnly published in the Duomo. Romola went to witness the scene, that the resistance it inspired might invigorate that sympathy with Savonarola which was one source of her strength. It was in memorable contrast with the scene she had been accustomed to witness there.

Instead of upturned citizen-faces filling the vast area under the morning light, the youngest rising amphitheatre-wise towards the walls, and making a garland of hope around the memories of age—instead of the mighty voice thrilling all hearts with the sense of great things, visible and invisible, to be struggled for—there were the bare walls at evening made more sombre by the glimmer of tapers; there was the black and grey flock of monks and secular clergy with bent, unexpectant faces; there was the occasional tinkling of little bells in the pauses of a monotonous voice reading a sentence which had already been long hanging up in the churches; and at last there was the extinction of the tapers, and the slow, shuffling tread of monkish feet departing in the dim silence.

Romola's ardour on the side of the Frate was

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doubly strengthened by the gleeful triumph she saw in hard and coarse faces, and by the fear-stricken confusion in the faces and speech of many among his strongly-attached friends. The question where the duty of obedience ends, and the duty of resistance begins, could in no case be an easy one; but it was made overwhelmingly difficult by the belief that the Church was — not a compromise of parties to secure a more or less approximate justice in the appropriation of funds, but—a living organism, instinct with Divine power to bless and to curse. To most of the pious Florentines, who had hitherto felt no doubt in their adherence to the Frate, that belief in the Divine potency of the Church was not an embraced opinion, it was an inalienable impression, like the concavity of the blue firmament; and the boldness of Savonarola's written arguments that the Excommunication was unjust, and that, being unjust, it was not valid, only made them tremble the more, as a defiance cast at a mystic image, against whose subtle immeasurable power there was neither weapon nor defence.

But Romola, whose mind had not been allowed to draw its early nourishment from the traditional associations of the Christian community in which her father had lived a life apart, felt her relation to the Church only through Savonarola; his moral force had been the only authority to which she had bowed; and in his excommunication she only saw the menace of hostile vice: on one side she saw a man whose life was devoted to the ends of public virtue and spiritual purity, and on the other the

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assault of alarmed selfishness, headed by a lustful, greedy, lying, and murderous old man, once called Rodrigo Borgia, and now lifted to the pinnacle of infamy as Pope Alexander the Sixth. The finer shades of fact which soften the edge of such antitheses are not apt to be seen except by neutrals, who are not distressed to discern some folly in maryrs and some judiciousness in the men who burnt them.

But Romola required a strength that neutrality could not give; and this Excommunication, which simplified and ennobled the resistant position of Savonarola by bringing into prominence its wider relations, seemed to come to her like a rescue from the threatening isolation of criticism and doubt. The Frate was now withdrawn from that smaller antagonism against Florentine enemies into which he continually fell in the unchecked excitement of the pulpit, and presented himself simply as appealing to the Christian world against a vicious exercise of ecclesiastical power. He was a standard-bearer leaping into the breach. Life never seems so clear and easy as when the heart is beating faster at the sight of some generous self-risking deed. We feel no doubt then what is the highest prize the soul can win; we almost believe in our own power to attain it. By a new current of such enthusiasm Romola was helped through these difficult summer days. She had ventured on no words to Tito that would apprise him of her late interview with Baldassarre, and the revelation he had made to her. What would such agitating, difficult words win from him? No admission of the truth; nothing, probably, but a

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cool sarcasm about her sympathy with his assassin. Baldassarre was evidently helpless: the thing to be feared was, not that he should injure Tito, but that Tito, coming upon his traces, should carry out some new scheme for ridding himself of the injured man who was a haunting dread to him. Romola felt that she could do nothing decisive until she had seen Baldassarre again, and learned the full truth about that "other wife"—learned whether she were the wife to whom Tito was first bound.

The possibilities about that other wife, which involved the worst wound to her hereditary pride, mingled themselves as a newly-embittering suspicion with the earliest memories of her illusory love, eating away the lingering associations of tenderness with the past image of her husband; and her irresistible belief in the rest of Baldassarre's revelation made her shrink from Tito with a horror which would perhaps have urged some passionate speech in spite of herself if he had not been more than usually absent from home. Like many of the wealthier citizens in that time of pestilence, he spent the intervals of business chiefly in the country: the agreeable Melema was welcome at many villas, and since Romola had refused to leave the city, he had no need to provide a country residence of his own.

But at last, in the later days of July, the alleviation of those public troubles which had absorbed her activity and much of her thought, left Romola to a less counteracted sense of her personal lot. The Plague had almost disappeared, and the position of

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Savonarola was made more hopeful by a favourable magistracy, who were writing urgent vindicatory letters to Rome on his behalf, entreating the withdrawal of the Excommunication.

Romola's healthy and vigorous frame was undergoing the reaction of languor inevitable after continuous excitement and over-exertion; but her mental restlessness would not allow her to remain at home without peremptory occupation, except during the sultry hours. In the cool of the morning and evening she walked out constantly, varying her direction as much as possible, with the vague hope that if Baldassarre were still alive she might encounter him. Perhaps some illness had brought a new paralysis of memory, and he had forgotten where she lived — forgotten even her existence. That was her most sanguine explanation of his non-appearance. The explanation she felt to be most probable was, that he had died of the Plague.

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CHAPTER LVI.

THE OTHER WIFE.

THE morning warmth was already beginning to be rather oppressive to Romola, when, after a walk along by the walls on her way from San Marco, she turned towards the intersecting streets again at the gate of Santa Croce.

The Borgo La Croce was so still, that she listened to her own footsteps on the pavement in the sunny silence, until, on approaching a bend in the street, she saw, a few yards before her, a little child not more than three years old, with no other clothing than his white shirt, pause from a waddling run and look around him. In the first moment of coming nearer she could only see his back—a boy's back, square and sturdy, with a cloud of reddish-brown curls above it; but in the next he turned towards her, and she could see his dark eyes wide with tears, and his lower lip pushed up and trembling, while his fat brown fists clutched his shirt helplessly. The glimpse of a tall black figure sending a shadow over him brought his bewildered fear to

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a climax, and a loud crying sob sent the big tears rolling.

Romola, with the ready maternal instinct which was one hidden source of her passionate tenderness, instantly uncovered her head, and, stooping down on the pavement, put her arms round him, and her cheeks against his, while she spoke to him in caressing tones. At first his sobs were only the louder, but he made no effort to get away, and presently the outburst ceased with that strange abruptness which belongs to childish joys and griefs: his face lost its distortion, and was fixed in an open-mouthed gaze at Romola.

"You have lost yourself, little one," she said, kissing him. "Never mind! we will find the house again. Perhaps mamma will meet us."

She divined that he had made his escape at a moment when the mother's eyes were turned away from him, and thought it likely that he would soon be followed.

"Oh, what a heavy, heavy boy!" she said, trying to lift him. "I cannot carry you. Come, then, you must toddle back by my side."

The parted lips remained motionless in awed silence, and one brown fist still clutched the shirt with as much tenacity as ever; but the other yielded itself quite willingly to the wonderful white hand, strong but soft.

"You *have* a mamma?" said Romola, as they set out, looking down at the boy with a certain yearning. But he was mute. A girl under those circumstances might perhaps have chirped abundantly; not so

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this square-shouldered little man with the big cloud of curls.

He was awake to the first sign of his whereabout, however. At the turning by the front of San Ambrogio he dragged Romola towards it, looking up at her.

"Ah, that is the way home, is it?" she said, smiling at him. He only thrust his head forward and pulled, as an admonition that they should go faster.

There was still another turning that he had a decided opinion about, and then Romola found herself in a short street leading to open garden ground. It was in front of a house at the end of this street that the little fellow paused, pulling her towards some stone stairs. He had evidently no wish for her to loose his hand, and she would not have been willing to leave him without being sure that she was delivering him to his friends. They mounted the stairs, seeing but dimly in that sudden withdrawal from the sunlight, till, at the final landing-place, an extra stream of light came from an open doorway. Passing through a small lobby, they came to another open door, and there Romola paused. Her approach had not been heard.

On a low chair at the farther end of the room, opposite the light, sat Tessa, with one hand on the edge of the cradle, and her head hanging a little on one side, fast asleep. Near one of the windows, with her back turned towards the door, sat Monna Lisa at her work of preparing salad, in deaf unconsciousness. There was only an instant for Romola's

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eyes to take in that still scene; for Lillo snatched his hand away from her and ran up to his mother's side, not making any direct effort to wake her, but only leaning his head back against her arm, and surveying Romola seriously from that distance.

As Lillo pushed against her, Tessa opened her eyes, and looked up in bewilderment; but her glance had no sooner rested on the figure at the opposite doorway than she started up, blushed deeply, and began to tremble a little, neither speaking nor moving forward.

"Ah! we have seen each other before," said Romola, smiling, and coming forward. "I am glad it was *your* little boy. He was crying in the street; I suppose he had run away. So we walked together a little way, and then he knew where he was, and brought me here. But you had not missed him? That is well, else you would have been frightened."

The shock of finding that Lillo had run away overcame every other feeling in Tessa for the moment. Her colour went again, and, seizing Lillo's arm, she ran with him to Monna Lisa, saying, with a half sob, loud in the old woman's ear—

"Oh, Lisa, you are wicked! Why will you stand with your back to the door? Lillo ran away ever so far into the street."

"Holy Mother!" said Monna Lisa, in her meek, thick tone, letting the spoon fall from her hands. "Where were *you*, then? I thought you were there, and had your eye on him."

"But you *know* I go to sleep when I am rocking," said Tessa, in pettish remonstrance.

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"Well, well, we must keep the outer door shut, or else tie him up," said Monna Lisa, "for he'll be as cunning as Satan before long, and that's the holy truth. But how came he back, then?"

This question recalled Tessa to the consciousness of Romola's presence. Without answering, she turned towards her, blushing and timid again, and Monna Lisa's eyes followed her movement. The old woman made a low reverence, and said—

"Doubtless the most noble lady brought him back." Then, advancing a little nearer to Romola, she added, "It's my shame for him to have been found with only his shirt on; but he kicked, and wouldn't have his other clothes on this morning, and the mother, poor thing, will never hear of his being beaten. But what's an old woman to do without a stick when the lad's legs get so strong? Let your nobleness look at his legs."

Lillo, conscious that his legs were in question, pulled his shirt up a little higher, and looked down at their olive roundness with a dispassionate and curious air. Romola laughed, and stooped to give him a caressing shake and a kiss, and this action helped the reassurance that Tessa had already gathered from Monna Lisa's address to Romola. For when Naldo had been told about the adventure at the Carnival, and Tessa had asked him who the heavenly lady that had come just when she was wanted, and had vanished so soon, was likely to be—whether she could be the Holy Madonna herself?—he had answered, "Not exactly, my Tessa; only one of the saints," and had not chosen to say

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more. So that in the dream-like combination of small experience which made up Tessa's thought, Romola had remained confusedly associated with the pictures in the churches, and when she reappeared, the grateful remembrance of her protection was slightly tinctured with religious awe—not deeply, for Tessa's dread was chiefly of ugly and evil beings. It seemed unlikely that good beings would be angry and punish her, as it was the nature of Nofri and the devil to do. And now that Monna Lisa had spoken freely about Lillo's legs and Romola had laughed, Tessa was more at her ease.

"Ninna's in the cradle," she said. "*She's* pretty too."

Romola went to look at the sleeping Ninna, and Monna Lisa, one of the exceptionally meek deaf, who never expect to be spoken to, returned to her salad.

"Ah! she is waking: she has opened her blue eyes," said Romola. "You must take her up, and I will sit down in this chair—may I?—and nurse Lillo. Come, Lillo!"

She sat down in Tito's chair, and put out her arms towards the lad, whose eyes had followed her. He hesitated: and, pointing his small fingers at her with a half-puzzled, half-angry feeling, said, "That's Babbo's chair," not seeing his way out of the difficulty if Babbo came and found Romola in his place.

"But Babbo is not here, and I shall go soon. Come, let me nurse you as he does," said Romola, wondering to herself for the first time what sort

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of Babbo he was whose wife was dressed in contadina fashion, but had a certain daintiness about her person that indicated idleness and plenty. Lillo consented to be lifted up, and, finding the lap exceedingly comfortable, began to explore her dress and hands, to see if there were any ornaments beside the rosary.

Tessa, who had hitherto been occupied in coaxing Ninna out of her waking peevishness, now sat down in her low chair, near Romola's knee, arranging Ninna's tiny person to advantage, jealous that the strange lady too seemed to notice the boy most, as Naldo did.

"Lillo was going to be angry with me, because I sat in Babbo's chair," said Romola, as she bent forward to kiss Ninna's little foot. "Will he come soon and want it?"

"Ah, no!" said Tessa, "you can sit in it a long while. I shall be sorry when you go. When you first came to take care of me at the Carnival, I thought it was wonderful; you came and went away again so fast. And Naldo said, perhaps you were a saint, and that made me tremble a little, though the saints are very good, I know; and you were good to me, and now you have taken care of Lillo. Perhaps you will always come and take care of me. That was how Naldo did a long while ago; he came and took care of me when I was frightened, one San Giovanni. I couldn't think where he came from—he was so beautiful and good. And so are you," ended Tessa, looking up at Romola with devout admiration.

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"Naldo is your husband. His eyes are like Lillo's," said Romola, looking at the boy's darkly-pencilled eyebrows, unusual at his age. She did not speak interrogatively, but with a quiet certainty of inference which was necessarily mysterious to Tessa.

"Ah! you know him!" she said, pausing a little in wonder. "Perhaps you know Nofri and Peretola, and our house on the hill, and everything. Yes, like Lillo's; but not his hair. His hair is dark and long——" she went on, getting rather excited. "Ah! if you know it, ecco!"

She had put her hand to a thin red silk cord that hung round her neck, and drew from her bosom the tiny old parchment *Breve*, the horn of red coral, and a long dark curl carefully tied at one end and suspended with those mystic treasures. She held them towards Romola, away from Ninna's snatching hand.

"It is a fresh one. I cut it lately. See how bright it is!" she said, laying it against the white background of Romola's fingers. "They get dim, and then he lets me cut another when his hair is grown; and I put it with the Breve, because sometimes he is away a long while, and then I think it helps to take care of me."

A slight shiver passed through Romola as the curl was laid across her fingers. At Tessa's first mention of her husband as having come mysteriously she knew not whence, a possibility had risen before Romola that made her heart beat faster; for to one who is anxiously in search of a certain object the

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faintest suggestions have a peculiar significance. And when the curl was held towards her, it seemed for an instant like a mocking phantasm of the lock she herself had cut to wind with one of her own five years ago. But she preserved her outward calmness, bent not only on knowing the truth, but also on coming to that knowledge in a way that would not pain this poor, trusting, ignorant thing, with the child's mind in the woman's body. "Foolish and helpless:" yes; so far she corresponded to Baldassarre's account.

"It is a beautiful curl," she said, resisting the impulse to withdraw her hand. "Lillo's curls will be like it, perhaps, for *his* cheek, too, is dark. And you never know where your husband goes to when he leaves you?"

"No," said Tessa, putting back her treasures out of the children's way. "But I know Messer San Michele takes care of him, for he gave him a beautiful coat, all made of little chains; and if he puts that on, nobody can kill him. And perhaps, if——" Tessa hesitated a little, under a recurrence of that original dreamy wonder about Romola which had been expelled by chatting contact—"if you *were* a saint, you would take care of him, too, because you have taken care of me and Lillo."

An agitated flush came over Romola's face in the first moment of certainty, but she had bent her cheek against Lillo's head. The feeling that leaped out in that flush was something like exultation at the thought that the wife's burden might be about to slip from her overladen shoulders; that this little

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ignorant creature might prove to be Tito's lawful wife. A strange exultation for a proud and high-born woman to have been brought to! But it seemed to Romola as if that were the only issue that would make duty anything else for her than an insoluble problem. Yet she was not deaf to Tessa's last appealing words; she raised her head, and said, in her clearest tones—

"I will always take care of you if I see you need me. But that beautiful coat? your husband did not wear it when you were first married? Perhaps he used not to be so long away from you then?"

"Ah, yes! he was. Much—much longer. So long, I thought he would never come back. I used to cry. Oh me! I was beaten then; a long, long while ago at Peretola, where we had the goats and mules."

"And how long had you been married before your husband had that chain coat?" said Romola, her heart beating faster and faster.

Tessa looked meditative, and began to count on her fingers, and Romola watched the fingers as if they would tell the secret of her destiny.

"The chestnuts were ripe when we were married," said Tessa, marking off her thumb and fingers again as she spoke; "and then again they were ripe at Peretola before he came back, and then again, after that, on the hill. And soon the soldiers came, and we heard the trumpets, and then Naldo had the coat."

"You had been married more than two years. In which church were you married?" said Romola, too entirely absorbed by one thought to put any question that was less direct. Perhaps before the

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next morning she might go to her godfather and say that she was not Tito Melema's lawful wife—that the vows which had bound her to strive after an impossible union had been made void beforehand.

Tessa gave a slight start at Romola's new tone of inquiry, and looked up at her with a hesitating expression. Hitherto she had prattled on without consciousness that she was making revelations, any more than when she said old things over and over again to Monna Lisa.

"Naldo said I was never to tell about that," she said, doubtfully. "Do you think he would not be angry if I told you?"

"It is right that you should tell me. Tell me everything," said Romola, looking at her with mild authority.

If the impression from Naldo's command had been much more recent than it was, the constraining effect of Romola's mysterious authority would have overcome it. But the sense that she was telling what she had never told before made her begin with a lowered voice.

"It was not in a church—it was at the Natività, when there was a fair, and all the people went overnight to see the Madonna in the Nunziata, and my mother was ill and couldn't go, and I took the bunch of cocoons for her; and then he came to me in the church and I heard him say, 'Tessa!' I knew him because he had taken care of me at the San Giovanni, and then we went into the piazza where the fair was, and I had some *berlingozzi*, for I was hungry and he was very good to me; and at

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the end of the piazza there was a holy father, and an altar like what they have at the processions outside the churches. So he married us, and then Naldo took me back into the church and left me; and I went home, and my mother died, and Nofri began to beat me more, and Naldo never came back. And I used to cry, and once at the Carnival I saw him and followed him, and he was angry, and said he would come some time, I must wait. So I went and waited; but, oh! it was a long while before he came; but he would have come if he could, for he was good; and then he took me away, because I cried and said I could not bear to stay with Nofri. And, oh! I was so glad, and since then I have been always happy, for I don't mind about the goats and mules, because I have Lillo and Ninna now; and Naldo is never angry, only I think he doesn't love Ninna so well as Lillo, and she *is* pretty."

Quite forgetting that she had thought her speech rather momentous at the beginning, Tessa fell to devouring Ninna with kisses, while Romola sat in silence with absent eyes. It was inevitable that in this moment she should think of the three beings before her chiefly in their relation to her own lot, and she was feeling the chill of disappointment that her difficulties were not to be solved by external law. She had relaxed her hold of Lillo, and was leaning her cheek against her hand, seeing nothing of the scene around her. Lillo was quick in perceiving a change that was not agreeable to him; he had not yet made any return to her caresses, but he objected to their withdrawal, and putting up both

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his brown arms to pull her head towards him, he said, "Play with me again!"

Romola, roused from her self-absorption, clasped the lad anew, and looked from him to Tessa, who had now paused from her shower of kisses, and seemed to have returned to the more placid delight of contemplating the heavenly lady's face. That face was undergoing a subtle change, like the gradual oncoming of a warmer, softer light. Presently Romola took her scissors from her scarsella, and cut off one of her long wavy locks, while the three pair of wide eyes followed her movements with kitten-like observation.

"I must go away from you now," she said, "but I will leave this lock of hair that it may remind you of me, because if you are ever in trouble you can think that perhaps God will send me to take care of you again. I cannot tell you where to find me, but if I ever know that you want me, I will come to you. Addio!"

She had set down Lillo hurriedly, and held out her hand to Tessa, who kissed it with a mixture of awe and sorrow at this parting. Romola's mind was oppressed with thoughts; she needed to be alone as soon as possible, but with her habitual care for the least fortunate, she turned aside to put her hand in a friendly way on Monna Lisa's shoulder and make her a farewell sign. Before the old woman had finished her deep reverence, Romola had disappeared.

Monna Lisa and Tessa moved towards each other by simultaneous impulses, while the two children

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stood clinging to their mother's skirts as if they, too, felt the atmosphere of awe.

"Do you think she *was* a saint?" said Tessa, in Lisa's ear, showing her the lock.

Lisa rejected that notion very decidedly by a backward movement of her fingers, and then stroking the rippled gold, said—

"She's a great and noble lady. I saw such in my youth."

Romola went home and sat alone through the sultry hours of that day with the heavy certainty that her lot was unchanged. She was thrown back again on the conflict between the demands of an outward law, which she recognised as a widely-ramifying obligation, and the demands of inner moral facts which were becoming more and more peremptory. She had drunk in deeply the spirit of that teaching by which Savonarola had urged her to return to her place. She felt that the sanctity attached to all close relations, and, therefore, pre-eminently to the closest, was but the expression in outward law of that result towards which all human goodness and nobleness must spontaneously tend; that the light abandonment of ties, whether inherited or voluntary, because they had ceased to be pleasant, was the uprooting of social and personal virtue. What else had Tito's crime towards Baldassarre been but that abandonment working itself out to the most hideous extreme of falsity and ingratitude?

And the inspiring consciousness breathed into her by Savonarola's influence that her lot was vitally united with the general lot had exalted even the

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minor details of obligation into religion. She was marching with a great army; she was feeling the stress of a common life. If victims were needed, and it was uncertain on whom the lot might fall, she would stand ready to answer to her name. She had stood long; she had striven hard to fulfil the bond, but she had seen all the conditions which made the fulfilment possible gradually forsaking her. The one effect of her marriage-tie seemed to be the stifling predominance over her of a nature that she despised. All her efforts at union had only made its impossibility more palpable, and the relation had become for her simply a degrading servitude. The law was sacred. Yes, but rebellion might be sacred too. It flashed upon her mind that the problem before her was essentially the same as that which had lain before Savonarola—the problem where the sacredness of obedience ended, and where the sacredness of rebellion began. To her, as to him, there had come one of those moments in life when the soul must dare to act on its own warrant, not only without external law to appeal to, but in the face of a law which is not unarmed with Divine lightnings—lightnings that may yet fall if the warrant has been false.

Before the sun had gone down she had adopted a resolve. She would ask no counsel of her godfather or of Savonarola until she had made one determined effort to speak freely with Tito and obtain his consent that she should live apart from him. She desired not to leave him clandestinely again, or to forsake Florence. She would tell him that if he

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ever felt a real need of her, she would come back to him. Was not that the utmost faithfulness to her bond that could be required of her? A shuddering anticipation came over her that he would clothe a refusal in a sneering suggestion that she should enter a convent as the only mode of quitting him that would not be scandalous. He knew well that her mind revolted from that means of escape, not only because of her own repugnance to a narrow rule, but because all the cherished memories of her father forbade that she should adopt a mode of life which was associated with his deepest griefs and his bitterest dislike.

Tito had announced his intention of coming home this evening. She would wait for him, and say what she had to say at once, for it was difficult to get his ear during the day. If he had the slightest suspicion that personal words were coming, he slipped away with an appearance of unpremeditated ease. When she sent for Maso to tell him that she would wait for his master, she observed that the old man looked at her and lingered with a mixture of hesitation and wondering anxiety; but finding that she asked him no question, he slowly turned away. Why should she ask questions? Perhaps Maso only knew or guessed something of what she knew already.

It was late before Tito came. Romola had been pacing up and down the long room which had once been the library, with the windows open, and a loose white linen robe on instead of her usual black garment. She was glad of that change after the long hours of heat and motionless meditation; but the

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coolness and exercise made her more intensely wakeful, and as she went with the lamp in her hand to open the door for Tito, he might well have been startled by the vividness of her eyes and the expression of painful resolution, which was in contrast with her usual self-restrained quiescence before him. But it seemed that this excitement was just what he expected.

"Ah! it is you, Romola. Maso is gone to bed," he said, in a grave, quiet tone, interposing to close the door for her. Then, turning round, he said, looking at her more fully than he was wont, "You have heard it all, I see."

Romola quivered. *He* then was inclined to take the initiative. He had been to Tessa. She led the way through the nearest door, set down her lamp, and turned towards him again.

"You must not think despairingly of the consequences," said Tito, in a tone of soothing encouragement, at which Romola stood wondering, until he added, "The accused have too many family ties with all parties not to escape; and Messer Bernardo del Nero has other things in his favour besides his age."

Romola started, and gave a cry as if she had been suddenly stricken by a sharp weapon.

"What! you did not know it?" said Tito, putting his hand under her arm that he might lead her to a seat; but she seemed to be unaware of his touch.

"Tell me," she said, hastily—"tell me what it is."

"A man, whose name you may forget—Lamberto dell' Antella—who was banished, has been seized within the territory: a letter has been found on him

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of very dangerous import to the chief Mediceans, and the scoundrel, who was once a favourite hound of Piero de' Medici, is ready now to swear what any one pleases against him or his friends. Some have made their escape, but five are now in prison."

"My godfather?" said Romola, scarcely above a whisper, as Tito made a slight pause.

"Yes: I grieve to say it. But along with him there are three, at least, whose names have a commanding interest even among the popular party—Niccolò Ridolfi, Lorenzo Tornabuoni, and Giannozzo Pucci."

The tide of Romola's feelings had been violently turned into a new channel. In the tumult of that moment there could be no check to the words which came as the impulsive utterance of her long-accumulating horror. When Tito had named the men of whom she felt certain he was the confederate, she said, with a recoiling gesture and low-toned bitterness—

"And *you*—you are safe?"

"You are certainly an amiable wife, my Romola," said Tito, with the coldest irony. "Yes; I am safe."

They turned away from each other in silence.

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CHAPTER LVII.

WHY TITO WAS SAFE.

Tito had good reasons for saying that he was safe. In the last three months, during which he had foreseen the discovery of the Medicean conspirators as a probable event, he had had plenty of time to provide himself with resources. He had been strengthening his influence at Rome and at Milan, by being the medium of secret information and indirect measures against the Frate and the popular party; he had cultivated more assiduously than ever the regard of this party, by showing subtle evidence that his political convictions were entirely on their side; and all the while, instead of withdrawing his agency from the Mediceans, he had sought to be more actively employed and exclusively trusted by them. It was easy to him to keep up this triple game. The principle of duplicity admitted by the Mediceans on their own behalf deprived them of any standard by which they could measure the trustworthiness of a colleague who had not, like themselves, hereditary interests, alliances, and prejudices, which were in-

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tensely Medicean. In their minds, to deceive the opposite party was fair stratagem; to deceive their own party was a baseness to which they felt no temptation; and, in using Tito's facile ability, they were not keenly awake to the fact that the absence of traditional attachments which made him a convenient agent was also the absence of what among themselves was the chief guarantee of mutual honour. Again, the Roman and Milanese friends of the aristocratic party, or Arrabbiati, who were the bitterest enemies of Savonarola, carried on a system of underhand correspondence and espionage, in which the deepest hypocrisy was the best service, and demanded the heaviest pay; so that to suspect an agent because he played a part strongly would have been an absurd want of logic. On the other hand, the Piagnoni of the popular party, who had the directness that belongs to energetic conviction, were the more inclined to credit Tito with sincerity in his political adhesion to them, because he affected no religious sympathies.

By virtue of these conditions, the last three months had been a time of flattering success to Tito. The result he most cared for was the securing of a future position for himself at Rome or at Milan; for he had a growing determination, when the favourable moment should come, to quit Florence for one of those great capitals where life was easier, and the rewards of talent and learning were more splendid. At present, the scale dipped in favour of Milan; and if within the year he could render certain services to Duke Ludovico Sforza, he had the prospect of a place

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at the Milanese court which outweighed the advantages of Rome.

The revelation of the Medicean conspiracy, then, had been a subject of forethought to Tito; but he had not been able to foresee the mode in which it would be brought about. The arrest of Lamberto dell' Antella with a tell-tale letter on his person, and a bitter rancour against the Medici in his heart, was an incalculable event. It was not possible, in spite of the careful pretexts with which his agency had been guarded, that Tito should escape implication: he had never expected this in case of any wide discovery concerning the Medicean plots. But his quick mind had soon traced out the course that would secure his own safety with the fewest unpleasant concomitants. It is agreeable to keep a whole skin; but the skin still remains an organ sensitive to the atmosphere.

His reckoning had not deceived him. That night, before he returned home, he had secured the three results for which he most cared: he was to be freed from all proceedings against him on account of complicity with the Mediceans; he was to retain his secretaryship for another year, unless he previously resigned it; and, lastly, the price by which he had obtained these guarantees was to be kept as a State secret. The price would have been thought heavy by most men; and Tito himself would rather not have paid it.

He had applied himself first to win the mind of Francesco Valori, who was not only one of the Ten under whom he immediately held his secretaryship, but one of the special council appointed to investi-

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gate the evidence of the plot. Francesco Valori, as we have seen, was the head of the Piagnoni, a man with certain fine qualities that were not incompatible with violent partisanship, with an arrogant temper that alienated his friends, nor with bitter personal animosities — one of the bitterest being directed against Bernardo del Nero. To him, in a brief private interview, after obtaining a pledge of secrecy, Tito avowed his own agency for the Mediceans—an agency induced by motives about which he was very frank, declaring at the same time that he had always believed their efforts futile, and that he sincerely preferred the maintenance of the popular government; affected to confide to Valori, as a secret, his own personal dislike for Bernardo del Nero; and, after this preparation, came to the important statement that there was another Medicean plot, of which, if he obtained certain conditions from the government, he could, by a journey to Siena and into Romagna, where Piero de' Medici was again trying to gather forces, obtain documentary evidence to lay before the council. To this end it was essential that his character as a Medicean agent should be unshaken for all Mediceans, and hence the fact that he had been a source of information to the authorities must be wrapped in profound secrecy. Still, some odour of the facts might escape in spite of precaution, and before Tito could incur the unpleasant consequences of acting against his friends, he must be assured of immunity from any prosecution as a Medicean, and from deprivation of office for a year to come.

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These propositions did not sound in the ear of Francesco Valori precisely as they sound to us. Valori's mind was not intensely bent on the estimation of Tito's conduct; and it *was* intensely bent on procuring an extreme sentence against the five prisoners. There were sure to be immense efforts to save them; and it was to be wished (on public grounds) that the evidence against them should be of the strongest, so as to alarm all well-affected men at the dangers of clemency. The character of legal proceedings at that time implied that evidence was one of those desirable things which could only be come at by foul means. To catch a few people and torture them into confessing everybody's guilt was one step towards justice; and it was not always easy to see the next, unless a traitor turned up. Lamberto dell' Antella had been tortured in aid of his previous willingness to tell more than he knew; nevertheless, additional and stronger facts were desirable, especially against Bernardo del Nero, who, so far as appeared hitherto, had simply refrained from betraying the late plot after having tried in vain to discourage it; for the welfare of Florence demanded that the guilt of Bernardo del Nero should be put in the strongest light. So Francesco Valori zealously believed; and perhaps he was not himself aware that the strength of his zeal was determined by his hatred. He decided that Tito's proposition ought to be accepted, laid it before his colleagues without disclosing Tito's name, and won them over to his opinion. Late in the day, Tito was admitted to an audience of the Special Council, and produced a deep

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sensation among them by revealing another plot for insuring the mastery of Florence to Piero de' Medici, which was to have been carried into execution in the middle of this very month of August. Documentary evidence on this subject would do more than anything else to make the right course clear. He received a commission to start for Siena by break of day; and, besides this, he carried away with him from the council chamber a written guarantee of his immunity and of his retention of office.

Among the twenty Florentines who bent their grave eyes on Tito, as he stood gracefully before them, speaking of startling things with easy periphrasis, and with that apparently unaffected admission of being actuated by motives short of the highest, which is often the intensest affectation, there were several whose minds were not too entirely preoccupied to pass a new judgment on him in these new circumstances; they silently concluded that this ingenious and serviceable Greek was in future rather to be used for public needs than for private intimacy. Unprincipled men were useful, enabling those who had more scruples to keep their hands tolerably clean in a world where there was much dirty work to be done. Indeed, it was not clear to respectable Florentine brains, unless they held the Frate's extravagant belief in a possible purity and loftiness to be striven for on this earth, how life was to be carried on in any department without human instruments whom it would not be unbecoming to kick or to spit upon in the act of handing them their wages. Some of these very men who passed a tacit judgment on

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Tito were shortly to be engaged in a memorable transaction that could by no means have been carried through without the use of an unscrupulousness as decided as his; but, as their own bright poet Pulci had said for them, it is one thing to love the fruits of treachery, and another thing to love traitors—

> "Il tradimento a molti piace assai,
> Ma il traditore a gnun non piacque mai."

The same society has had a gibbet for the murderer and a gibbet for the martyr, an execrating hiss for a dastardly act, and as loud a hiss for many a word of generous truthfulness or just insight: a mixed condition of things which is the sign, not of hopeless confusion, but of struggling order.

For Tito himself, he was not unaware that he had sunk a little in the estimate of the men who had accepted his services. He had that degree of self-contemplation which necessarily accompanies the habit of acting on well-considered reasons, of whatever quality; and if he could have chosen, he would have declined to see himself disapproved by men of the world. He had never meant to be disapproved; he had meant always to conduct himself so ably that if he acted in opposition to the standard of other men they should not be aware of it; and the barrier between himself and Romola had been raised by the impossibility of such concealment with her. He shrank from condemnatory judgments as from a climate to which he could not adapt himself. But things were not so plastic in the hands of cleverness as could be wished, and events had turned out

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inconveniently. He had really no rancour against Messer Bernardo del Nero; he had a personal liking for Lorenzo Tornabuoni and Giannozzo Pucci. He had served them very ably, and in such a way that if their party had been winners he would have merited high reward; but was he to relinquish all the agreeable fruits of life because their party had failed? His proffer of a little additional proof against them would probably have no influence on their fate; in fact, he felt convinced they would escape any extreme consequences; but if he had not given it, his own fortunes, which made a promising fabric, would have been utterly ruined. And what motive could any man really have, except his own interest? Florentines whose passions were engaged in their petty and precarious political schemes might have no self-interest separable from family pride and tenacity in old hatreds and attachments; a modern simpleton who swallowed whole one of the old systems of philosophy, and took the indigestion it occasioned for the signs of a divine afflux or the voice of an inward monitor, might see his interest in a form of self-conceit which he called self-rewarding virtue; fanatics who believed in the coming Scourge and Renovation might see their own interest in a future palm-branch and white robe: but no man of clear intellect allowed his course to be determined by such puerile impulses or questionable inward fumes. Did not Pontanus, poet and philosopher of unrivalled Latinity, make the finest possible oration at Naples to welcome the French king, who had come to dethrone the learned orator's royal friend

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and patron? and still Pontanus held up his head and prospered. Men did not really care about these things, except when their personal spleen was touched. It was weakness only that was despised; power of any sort carried its immunity; and no man, unless by very rare good fortune, could mount high in the world without incurring a few unpleasant necessities which laid him open to enmity, and perhaps to a little hissing, when enmity wanted a pretext.

It was a faint prognostic of that hissing, gathered by Tito from certain indications when he was before the council, which gave his present conduct the character of an epoch to him, and made him dwell on it with argumentative vindication. It was not that he was taking a deeper step in wrong-doing, for it was not possible that he should feel any tie to the Mediceans to be stronger than the tie to his father; but his conduct to his father had been hidden by successful lying: his present act did not admit of total concealment—in its very nature it was a revelation. And Tito winced under his new liability to disesteem.

Well! a little patience, and in another year, or perhaps in half a year, he might turn his back on these hard, eager Florentines, with their futile quarrels and sinking fortunes. His brilliant success at Florence had had some ugly flaws in it: he had fallen in love with the wrong woman, and Baldassarre had come back under incalculable circumstances. But as Tito galloped with a loose rein towards Siena, he saw a future before him in which

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he would no longer be haunted by those mistakes. He had much money safe out of Florence already; he was in the fresh ripeness of eight-and-twenty; he was conscious of well-tried skill. Could he not strip himself of the past, as of rehearsal clothing, and throw away the old bundle, to robe himself for the real scene?

It did not enter into Tito's meditations on the future, that, on issuing from the council chamber and descending the stairs, he had brushed against a man whose face he had not stayed to recognise in the lamplight. The man was Ser Ceccone — also willing to serve the State by giving information against unsuccessful employers.

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CHAPTER LVIII.

A FINAL UNDERSTANDING.

Tito soon returned from Siena, but almost immediately set out on another journey, from which he did not return till the seventeenth of August. Nearly a fortnight had passed since the arrest of the accused, and still they were in prison, still their fate was uncertain. Romola had felt during this interval as if all cares were suspended for her, other than watching the fluctuating probabilities concerning that fate. Sometimes they seemed strongly in favour of the prisoners; for the chances of effective interest on their behalf were heightened by delay, and an indefinite prospect of delay was opened by the reluctance of all persons in authority to incur the odium attendant on any decision. On the one side there was a loud cry that the Republic was in danger, and that lenity to the prisoners would be the signal of attack for all its enemies; on the other, there was a certainty that a sentence of death and confiscation of property passed on five citizens of distinguished name, would entail the rancorous

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hatred of their relatives on all who were conspicuously instrumental to such a sentence.

The final judgment properly lay with the Eight, who presided over the administration of criminal justice; and the sentence depended on a majority of six votes. But the Eight shrank from their onerous responsibility, and asked in this exceptional case to have it shared by the Signoria (or the Gonfaloniere and the eight Priors). The Signoria in its turn shrugged its shoulders, and proposed the appeal to the Great Council. For, according to a law passed by the earnest persuasion of Savonarola nearly three years before, whenever a citizen was condemned to death by the fatal six votes (called the *sei fave* or *six beans*, beans being in more senses than one the political pulse of Florence), he had the right of appealing from that sentence to the Great Council.

But in this stage of the business, the friends of the accused resisted the appeal, determined chiefly by the wish to gain delay; and, in fact, strict legality required that sentence should have been passed prior to the appeal. Their resistance prevailed, and a middle course was taken; the sentence was referred to a large assembly convened on the seventeenth, consisting of all the higher magistracies, the smaller council or Senate of Eighty, and a select number of citizens.

On this day Romola, with anxiety heightened by the possibility that before its close her godfather's fate might be decided, had obtained leave to see him for the second time, but only in the presence

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of witnesses. She had returned to the Via de' Bardi in company with her cousin Brigida, still ignorant whether the council had come to any decisive issue; and Monna Brigida had gone out again to await the momentous news at the house of a friend belonging to one of the magistracies, that she might bring back authentic tidings as soon as they were to be had.

Romola had sunk on the first seat in the bright saloon, too much agitated, too sick at heart, to care about her place, or be conscious of discordance in the objects that surrounded her. She sat with her back to the door, resting her head on her hands. It seemed a long while since Monna Brigida had gone, and Romola was expecting her return. But when the door opened she knew it was not Monna Brigida who entered.

Since she had parted from Tito on that memorable night, she had had no external proof to warrant her belief that he had won his safety by treachery; on the contrary, she had had evidence that he was still trusted by the Mediceans, and was believed by them to be accomplishing certain errands of theirs in Romagna, under cover of fulfilling a commission of the government. For the obscurity in which the evidence concerning the conspirators was shrouded allowed it to be understood that Tito had escaped any implication.

But Romola's suspicion was not to be dissipated: her horror of his conduct towards Baldassarre projected itself over every conception of his acts; it was as if she had seen him committing a murder,

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and had had a diseased impression ever after that his hands were covered with fresh blood.

As she heard his step on the stone floor, a chill shudder passed through her; she could not turn round, she could not rise to give any greeting. He did not speak, but after an instant's pause took a seat on the other side of the table just opposite to her. Then she raised her eyes and looked at him; but she was mute. He did not show any irritation, but said, coolly—

"This meeting corresponds with our parting, Romola. But I understand that it is a moment of terrible suspense. I am come, however, if you will listen to me, to bring you the relief of hope."

She started, and altered her position, but looked at him dubiously.

"It will not be unwelcome to you to hear—even though it is I who tell it—that the council is prorogued till the twenty-first. The Eight have been frightened at last into passing a sentence of condemnation, but the demand has now been made on behalf of the condemned for the Appeal to the Great Council."

Romola's face lost its dubious expression; she asked eagerly—

"And when is it to be made?"

"It has not yet been granted; but it *may* be granted. The Special Council is to meet again on the twenty-first to deliberate whether the Appeal shall be allowed or not. In the meantime there is an interval of three days, in which chances may

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occur in favour of the prisoners—in which interest may be used on their behalf."

Romola started from her seat. The colour had risen to her face like a visible thought, and her hands trembled. In that moment her feeling towards Tito was forgotten.

"Possibly," said Tito, also rising, "your own intention may have anticipated what I was going to say. You are thinking of the Frate."

"I am," said Romola, looking at him with surprise. "Has he done anything? Is there anything to tell me?"

"Only this. It was Messer Francesco Valori's bitterness and violence which chiefly determined the course of things in the council to-day. Half the men who gave in their opinion against the prisoners were frightened into it, and there are numerous friends of Fra Girolamo both in this Special Council and out of it who are strongly opposed to the sentence of death — Piero Guicciardini, for example, who is one member of the Signoria that made the stoutest resistance; and there is Giovan Battista Ridolfi, who, Piagnone as he is, will not lightly forgive the death of his brother Niccolò."

"But how can the Appeal be denied," said Romola, indignantly, "when it is the law—when it was one of the chief glories of the popular government to have passed the law?"

"They call this an exceptional case. Of course there are ingenious arguments, but there is much more of loud bluster about the danger of the Repub-

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lic. But, you see, no opposition could prevent the assembly from being prorogued, and a certain powerful influence rightly applied during the next three days might determine the wavering courage of those who desire that the Appeal should be granted, and might even give a check to the headlong enmity of Francesco Valori. It happens to have come to my knowledge that the Frate has so far interfered as to send a message to him in favour of Lorenzo Tornabuoni. I know you can sometimes have access to the Frate: it might at all events be worth while to use your privilege now."

"It is true," said Romola, with an air of abstraction. "I cannot believe that the Frate would approve denying the Appeal."

"I heard it said by more than one person in the court of the Palazzo, before I came away, that it would be to the everlasting discredit of Fra Girolamo if he allowed a government which is almost entirely made up of his party, to deny the Appeal, without entering his protest, when he has been boasting in his books and sermons that it was he who got the law passed.[1] But between ourselves,

[1] The most recent, and in some respects the best, biographer of Savonarola, Signor Villari, endeavours to show that the Law of Appeal ultimately enacted, being wider than the law originally contemplated by Savonarola, was a source of bitter annoyance to him, as a contrivance of the aristocratic party for attaching to the measures of the popular government the injurious results of licence. But in taking this view the estimable biographer lost sight of the fact that, not only in his sermons, but in a deliberately prepared book (the *Compendium Revelationum*) written long after the Appeal had become law, Savonarola enumerates among the benefits secured to Florence, "*the Appeal from the Six Votes, advocated by me, for the greater security of the citizens.*"

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with all respect for your Frate's ability, my Romola, he has got into the practice of preaching that form of human sacrifices called killing tyrants and wicked malcontents, which some of his followers are likely to think inconsistent with lenity in the present case."

"I know, I know," said Romola, with a look and tone of pain. "But he is driven into those excesses of speech. It used to be different. I *will* ask for an interview. I cannot rest without it. I trust in the greatness of his heart."

She was not looking at Tito; her eyes were bent with a vague gaze towards the ground, and she had no distinct consciousness that the words she heard came from her husband.

"Better lose no time, then," said Tito, with unmixed suavity, moving his cap round in his hands as if he were about to put it on and depart. "And now, Romola, you will perhaps be able to see, in spite of prejudice, that my wishes go with yours in this matter. You will not regard the misfortune of my safety as an offence."

Something like an electric shock passed through Romola: it was the full consciousness of her husband's presence returning to her. She looked at him without speaking.

"At least," he added, in a slightly harder tone, "you will endeavour to base our intercourse on some other reasonings than that because an evil deed is possible, *I* have done it. Am I alone to be beyond the pale of your extensive charity?"

The feeling which had been driven back from

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Romola's lips a fortnight before rose again with the gathered force of a tidal wave. She spoke with a decision which told him that she was careless of consequences.

"It is too late, Tito. There is no killing the suspicion that deceit has once begotten. And now I know everything. I know who that old man was: he was your father, to whom you owe everything—to whom you owe more than if you had been his own child. By the side of that, it is a small thing that you broke my trust and my father's. As long as you deny the truth about that old man, there is a horror rising between us: the law that should make us one can never be obeyed. I too am a human being. I have a soul of my own that abhors your actions. Our union is a pretence — as if a perpetual lie could be a sacred marriage."

Tito did not answer immediately. When he did speak it was with a calculated caution, that was stimulated by alarm.

"And you mean to carry out that independence by quitting me, I presume?"

"I desire to quit you," said Romola, impetuously.

"And supposing I do not submit to part with what the law gives me some security for retaining? You will then, of course, proclaim your reasons in the ear of all Florence. You will bring forward your mad assassin, who is doubtless ready to obey your call, and you will tell the world that you believe his testimony because he is so rational as to desire to assassinate me. You will first inform the Signoria that I am a Medicean conspirator, and then you will

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inform the Mediceans that I have betrayed them, and in both cases you will offer the excellent proof that you believe me capable in general of everything bad. It will certainly be a striking position for a wife to adopt. And if, on such evidence, you succeed in holding me up to infamy, you will have surpassed all the heroines of the Greek drama."

He paused a moment, but she stood mute. He went on with the sense of mastery.

"I believe you have no other grievance against me—except that I have failed in fulfilling some lofty indefinite conditions on which you gave me your wifely affection, so that, by withdrawing it, you have gradually reduced me to the careful supply of your wants as a fair Piagnone of high condition and liberal charities. I think your success in gibbeting me is not certain. But doubtless you would begin by winning the ear of Messer Bernardo del Nero?"

"Why do I speak of anything?" cried Romola, in anguish, sinking on her chair again. "It is hateful in me to be thinking of myself."

She did not notice when Tito left the room, or know how long it was before the door opened to admit Monna Brigida. But in that instant she started up and said—

"Cousin, we must go to San Marco directly. I must see my confessor, Fra Salvestro."

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CHAPTER LIX.

PLEADING.

The morning was in its early brightness when Romola was again on her way to San Marco, having obtained through Fra Salvestro, the evening before, the promise of an interview with Fra Girolamo in the chapter-house of the convent. The rigidity with which Savonarola guarded his life from all the pretexts of calumny made such interviews very rare, and whenever they were granted, they were kept free from any appearance of mystery. For this reason the hour chosen was one at which there were likely to be other visitors in the outer cloisters of San Marco.

She chose to pass through the heart of the city that she might notice the signs of public feeling. Every loggia, every convenient corner of the piazza, every shop that made a rendezvous for gossips, was astir with the excitement of gratuitous debate; a languishing trade tending to make political discussion all the more vigorous. It was clear that the parties for and against the death of the conspirators were bent on

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making the fullest use of the three days' interval in order to determine the popular mood. Already handbills were in circulation; some presenting, in large print, the alternative of justice on the conspirators or ruin to the Republic; others in equally large print urging the observance of the law and the granting of the Appeal. Round these jutting islets of black capitals there were lakes of smaller characters setting forth arguments less necessary to be read: for it was an opinion entertained at that time (in the first flush of triumph at the discovery of printing), that there was no argument more widely convincing than question-begging phrases in large type.

Romola, however, cared especially to become acquainted with the arguments in smaller type, and, though obliged to hasten forward, she looked round anxiously as she went that she might miss no opportunity of securing copies. For a long way she saw none but such as were in the hands of eager readers, or else fixed on the walls, from which in some places the sbirri were tearing them down. But at last, passing behind San Giovanni with a quickened pace that she might avoid the many acquaintances who frequented the piazza, she saw Bratti with a stock of handbills which he appeared to be exchanging for small coin with the passers-by. She was too familiar with the humble life of Florence for Bratti to be any stranger to her, and turning towards him she said, "Have you two sorts of handbills, Bratti? Let me have them quickly."

"Two sorts," said Bratti, separating the wet

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sheets with a slowness that tried Romola's patience. "There's 'Law,' and there's 'Justice.'"

"Which sort do you sell most of?"

"'Justice'—'Justice' goes the quickest,—so I raised the price, and made it two danari. But then I bethought me the 'Law' was good ware too, and had as good a right to be charged for as 'Justice;' for people set no store by cheap things, and if I sold the 'Law' at one danaro, I should be doing it a wrong. And I'm a fair trader. 'Law,' or 'Justice,' it's all one to me; they're good wares. I got 'em both for nothing, and I sell 'em at a fair profit. But you'll want more than one of a sort?"

"No, no: here's a white quattrino for the two," said Romola, folding up the bills and hurrying away.

She was soon in the outer cloisters of San Marco, where Fra Salvestro was awaiting her under the cloister, but did not notice the approach of her light step. He was chatting, according to his habit, with lay visitors; for under the auspices of a government friendly to the Frate, the timidity about frequenting San Marco, which had followed on the first shock of the Excommunication, had been gradually giving way. In one of these lay visitors she recognised a well-known satellite of Francesco Valori, named Andrea Cambini, who was narrating or expounding with emphatic gesticulation, while Fra Salvestro was listening with that air of trivial curiosity which tells that the listener cares very much about news and very little about its quality. This characteristic of her confessor, which was always repulsive to Romola, was made exasperating to her at this moment by the

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certainty she gathered, from the disjointed words which reached her ear, that Cambini was narrating something relative to the fate of the conspirators. She chose not to approach the group, but as soon as she saw that she had arrested Fra Salvestro's attention, she turned towards the door of the chapter-house, while he, making a sign of approval, disappeared within the inner cloister. A lay Brother stood ready to open the door of the chapter-house for her, and closed it behind her as she entered.

Once more looked at by those sad frescoed figures which had seemed to be mourning with her at the death of her brother Dino, it was inevitable that something of that scene should come back to her; but the intense occupation of her mind with the present made the remembrance less a retrospect than an indistinct recurrence of impressions which blended themselves with her agitating fears, as if her actual anxiety were a revival of the strong yearning she had once before brought to this spot —to be repelled by marble rigidity. She gave no space for the remembrance to become more definite, for she at once opened the handbills, thinking she should perhaps be able to read them in the interval before Fra Girolamo appeared. But by the time she had read to the end of the one that recommended the observance of the law, the door was opening, and doubling up the papers she stood expectant.

When the Frate had entered she knelt, according to the usual practice of those who saw him in private; but as soon as he had uttered a benedictory greeting she rose and stood opposite to him at a few

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yards' distance. Owing to his seclusion since he had been excommunicated, it had been an unusually long while since she had seen him, and the late months had visibly deepened in his face the marks of over-taxed mental activity and bodily severities; and yet Romola was not so conscious of this change as of another, which was less definable. Was it that the expression of serene elevation and pure human fellowship which had once moved her was no longer present in the same force, or was it that the sense of his being divided from her in her feeling about her godfather roused the slumbering sources of alienation, and marred her own vision? Perhaps both causes were at work. Our relations with our fellow-men are most often determined by coincident currents of that sort; the inexcusable word or deed seldom comes until after affection or reverence has been already enfeebled by the strain of repeated excuses.

It was true that Savonarola's glance at Romola had some of that hardness which is caused by an egotistic prepossession. He divined that the interview she had sought was to turn on the fate of the conspirators, a subject on which he had already had to quell inner voices that might become loud again when encouraged from without. Seated in his cell, correcting the sheets of his 'Triumph of the Cross,' it was easier to repose on a resolution of neutrality.

"It is a question of moment, doubtless, on which you wished to see me, my daughter," he began, in a tone which was gentle rather from self-control

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than from immediate inclination. "I know you are not wont to lay stress on small matters."

"Father, you know what it is before I tell you," said Romola, forgetting everything else as soon as she began to pour forth her plea. "You know what I am caring for—it is for the life of the old man I love best in the world. The thought of him has gone together with the thought of my father as long as I remember the daylight. That is my warrant for coming to you, even if my coming should have been needless. Perhaps it is: perhaps you have already determined that your power over the hearts of men shall be used to prevent them from denying to Florentines a right which you yourself helped to earn for them."

"I meddle not with the functions of the State, my daughter," said Fra Girolamo, strongly disinclined to reopen externally a debate which he had already gone through inwardly. "I have preached and laboured that Florence should have a good government, for a good government is needful to the perfecting of the Christian life; but I keep away my hands from particular affairs which it is the office of experienced citizens to administer."

"Surely, father——" Romola broke off. She had uttered this first word almost impetuously, but she was checked by the counter-agitation of feeling herself in an attitude of remonstrance towards the man who had been the source of guidance and strength to her. In the act of rebelling she was bruising her own reverence.

Savonarola was too keen not to divine something

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of the conflict that was arresting her—too noble, deliberately to assume in calm speech that self-justifying evasiveness into which he was often hurried in public by the crowding impulses of the orator.

"Say what is in your heart; speak on, my daughter," he said, standing with his arms laid one upon the other, and looking at her with quiet expectation.

"I was going to say, father, that this matter is surely of higher moment than many about which I have heard you preach and exhort fervidly. If it belonged to you to urge that men condemned for offences against the State should have the right to appeal to the Great Council—if—" Romola was getting eager again—"if you count it a glory to have won that right for them, can it less belong to you to declare yourself against the right being denied to almost the first men who need it? Surely that touches the Christian life more closely than whether you knew beforehand that the Dauphin would die, or whether Pisa will be conquered."

There was a subtle movement, like a subdued sign of pain, in Savonarola's strong lips, before he began to speak.

"My daughter, I speak as it is given me to speak —I am not master of the times when I may become the vehicle of knowledge beyond the common lights of men. In this case I have no illumination beyond what wisdom may give to those who are charged with the safety of the State. As to the law of Appeal against the Six Votes, I laboured to have it passed in order that no Florentine should be sub-

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ject to loss of life and goods through the private hatred of a few who might happen to be in power; but these five men, who have desired to overthrow a free government and restore a corrupt tyrant, have been condemned with the assent of a large assembly of their fellow-citizens. They refused at first to have their cause brought before the Great Council. They have lost the right to the appeal."

"How can they have lost it?" said Romola. "It is the right to appeal against condemnation, and they have never been condemned till now; and, forgive me, father, it *is* private hatred that would deny them the appeal; it *is* the violence of the few that frightens others; else why was the assembly divided again directly after it had seemed to agree? And if anything weighs against the observance of the law, let this weigh *for* it—this, that you used to preach more earnestly than all else, that there should be no place given to hatred and bloodshed because of these party strifes, so that private ill-will should not find its opportunities in public acts. Father, you *know* that there is private hatred concerned here: will it not dishonour you not to have interposed on the side of mercy, when there are many who hold that it is also the side of law and justice?"

"My daughter," said Fra Girolamo, with more visible emotion than before, "there is a mercy which is weakness, and even treason against the common good. The safety of Florence, which means even more than the welfare of Florentines, now demands severity, as it once demanded mercy. It is not only

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for a past plot that these men are condemned, but also for a plot which has not yet been executed; and the devices that were leading to its execution are not put an end to: the tyrant is still gathering his forces in Romagna, and the enemies of Florence, who sit in the highest places of Italy, are ready to hurl any stone that will crush her."

"What plot?" said Romola, reddening, and trembling with alarmed surprise.

"You carry papers in your hand, I see," said Fra Girolamo, pointing to the handbills. "One of them will, perhaps, tell you that the government has had new information."

Romola hastily opened the handbill she had not yet read, and saw that the government had now positive evidence of a second plot, which was to have been carried out in this August time. To her mind it was like reading a confirmation that Tito had won his safety by foul means; his pretence of wishing that the Frate should exert himself on behalf of the condemned only helped the wretched conviction. She crushed up the paper in her hand, and, turning to Savonarola, she said, with new passion, "Father, what safety can there be for Florence when the worst man can always escape? And," she went on, a sudden flash of remembrance coming from the thought about her husband, "have not you yourself encouraged this deception which corrupts the life of Florence, by wanting more favour to be shown to Lorenzo Tornabuoni, who has worn two faces, and flattered you with a show of affection, when my godfather has always been honest? Ask

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all Florence who of those five men has the truest heart, and there will not be many who will name any other name than Bernardo del Nero. You did interpose with Francesco Valori for the sake of one prisoner: you have *not* then been neutral; and you know that your word will be powerful."

"I do not desire the death of Bernardo," said Savonarola, colouring deeply. "It would be enough if he were sent out of the city."

"Then why do you not speak to save an old man of seventy-five from dying a death of ignominy—to give him at least the fair chances of the law?" burst out Romola, the impetuosity of her nature so roused that she forgot everything but her indignation. "It is not that you feel bound to be neutral; else why did you speak for Lorenzo Tornabuoni? You spoke for him because he is more friendly to San Marco; my godfather feigns no friendship. It is not, then, as a Medicean that my godfather is to die; it is as a man you have no love for!"

When Romola paused, with cheeks glowing, and with quivering lips, there was dead silence. As she saw Fra Girolamo standing motionless before her, she seemed to herself to be hearing her own words over again; words that in this echo of consciousness were in strange, painful dissonance with the memories that made part of his presence to her. The moments of silence were expanded by gathering compunction and self-doubt. She had committed sacrilege in her passion. And even the sense that she could retract nothing of her plea, that her mind could not submit itself to Savonarola's negative,

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made it the more needful to her to satisfy those reverential memories. With a sudden movement towards him she said—

"Forgive me, father; it is pain to me to have spoken those words—yet I cannot help speaking. I am little and feeble compared with you; you brought me light and strength. But I submitted because I felt the proffered strength—because I saw the light. *Now* I cannot see it. Father, you yourself declare that there comes a moment when the soul must have no guide but the voice within it, to tell whether the consecrated thing has sacred virtue. And therefore I must speak."

Savonarola had that readily-roused resentment towards opposition, hardly separable from a power-loving and powerful nature, accustomed to seek great ends that cast a reflected grandeur on the means by which they are sought. His sermons have much of that red flame in them. And if he had been a meaner man his susceptibility might have shown itself in irritation at Romola's accusatory freedom, which was in strong contrast with the deference he habitually received from his disciples. But at this moment such feelings were nullified by that hard struggle which made half the tragedy of his life—the struggle of a mind possessed by a never-silent hunger after purity and simplicity, yet caught in a tangle of egoistic demands, false ideas, and difficult outward conditions, that made simplicity impossible. Keenly alive to all the suggestions of Romola's remonstrating words, he was rapidly surveying, as he had done before, the courses of action

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that were open to him, and their probable results. But it was a question on which arguments could seem decisive only in proportion as they were charged with feeling, and he had received no impulse that could alter his bias. He looked at Romola, and said—

"You have full pardon for your frankness, my daughter. You speak, I know, out of the fulness of your family affections. But these affections must give way to the needs of the Republic. If those men who have a close acquaintance with the affairs of the State believe, as I understand they do, that the public safety requires the extreme punishment of the law to fall on the five conspirators, I cannot control their opinion, seeing that I stand aloof from such affairs."

"Then you desire that they should die? You desire that the Appeal should be denied them?" said Romola, feeling anew repelled by a vindication which seemed to her to have the nature of a subterfuge.

"I have said that I do not desire their death."

"Then," said Romola, her indignation rising again, "you can be indifferent that Florentines should inflict death which you do not desire, when you might have protested against it — when you might have helped to hinder it, by urging the observance of a law which you held it good to get passed. Father, you used not to stand aloof: you used not to shrink from protesting. Do not say you cannot protest where the lives of men are concerned; say rather, you desire their death. Say rather, you hold it good

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for Florence that there shall be more blood and more hatred. Will the death of five Mediceans put an end to parties in Florence? Will the death of a noble old man like Bernardo del Nero save a city that holds such men as Dolfo Spini?"

"My daughter, it is enough. The cause of freedom, which is the cause of God's kingdom upon earth, is often most injured by the enemies who carry within them the power of certain human virtues. The wickedest man is often not the most insurmountable obstacle to the triumph of good."

"Then why do you say again, that you do not desire my godfather's death?" said Romola, in mingled anger and despair. "Rather, you hold it the more needful he should die because he is the better man. I cannot unravel your thoughts, father; I cannot hear the real voice of your judgment and conscience."

There was a moment's pause. Then Savonarola said, with keener emotion than he had yet shown—

"Be thankful, my daughter, if your own soul has been spared perplexity; and judge not those to whom a harder lot has been given. *You* see one ground of action in this matter. I see many. I have to choose that which will further the work intrusted to me. The end I seek is one to which minor respects must be sacrificed. The death of five men—were they less guilty than these—is a light matter weighed against the withstanding of the vicious tyrannies which stifle the life of Italy, and foster the corruption of the Church; a light matter weighed against the furthering of God's kingdom upon

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earth, the end for which I live and am willing myself to die."

Under any other circumstances, Romola would have been sensitive to the appeal at the beginning of Savonarola's speech; but at this moment she was so utterly in antagonism with him, that what he called perplexity seemed to her sophistry and doubleness; and as he went on, his words only fed that flame of indignation, which now again, more fully than ever before, lit up the memory of all his mistakes, and made her trust in him seem to have been a purblind delusion. She spoke almost with bitterness.

"Do you, then, know so well what will further the coming of God's kingdom, father, that you will dare to despise the plea of mercy—of justice—of faithfulness to your own teaching? Has the French king, then, brought renovation to Italy? Take care, father, lest your enemies have some reason when they say, that in your visions of what will further God's kingdom you see only what will strengthen your own party."

"And that is true!" said Savonarola, with flashing eyes. Romola's voice had seemed to him in that moment the voice of his enemies. "The cause of my party *is* the cause of God's kingdom."

"I do not believe it!" said Romola, her whole frame shaken with passionate repugnance. "God's kingdom is something wider — else, let me stand outside it with the beings that I love."

The two faces were lit up, each with an opposite emotion, each with an opposite certitude. Further words were impossible. Romola hastily covered her head and went out in silence.

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CHAPTER LX.

THE SCAFFOLD.

THREE days later the moon that was just surmounting the buildings of the piazza in front of the Old Palace within the hour of midnight, did not make the usual broad lights and shadows on the pavement. Not a hand's-breadth of pavement was to be seen, but only the heads of an eager struggling multitude. And instead of that background of silence in which the pattering footsteps and buzzing voices, the lute-thrumming or rapid scampering of the many night wanderers of Florence stood out in obtrusive distinctness, there was the background of a roar from mingled shouts and imprecations, tramplings and pushings, and accidental clashing of weapons, across which nothing was distinguishable but a darting shriek, or the heavy dropping toll of a bell.

Almost all who could call themselves the public of Florence were awake at that hour, and either enclosed within the limits of that piazza, or struggling to enter it. Within the palace were still assembled

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in the council chamber all the chief magistracies, the eighty members of the senate, and the other select citizens who had been in hot debate through long hours of daylight and torchlight whether the Appeal should be granted or whether the sentence of death should be executed on the prisoners forthwith, to forestall the dangerous chances of delay. And the debate had been so much like fierce quarrel that the noise from the council chamber had reached the crowd outside. Only within the last hour had the question been decided: the Signoria had remained divided, four of them standing out resolutely for the Appeal in spite of the strong argument that if they did not give way their houses should be sacked, until Francesco Valori, in brief and furious speech, made the determination of his party more ominously distinct by declaring that if the Signoria would not defend the liberties of the Florentine people by executing those five perfidious citizens, there would not be wanting others who would take that cause in hand to the peril of all who opposed it. The Florentine Cato triumphed. When the votes were counted again, the four obstinate white beans no longer appeared; the whole nine were of the fatal affirmative black, deciding the death of the five prisoners without delay—deciding also, only tacitly and with much more delay, the death of Francesco Valori.

And now, while the judicial Eight were gone to the Bargello to prepare for the execution, the five condemned men were being led barefoot and in irons through the midst of the council. It was their

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friends who had contrived this: would not Florentines be moved by the visible association of such cruel ignominy with two venerable men like Bernardo del Nero and Niccolò Ridolfi, who had taken their bias long before the new order of things had come to make Mediceanism retrograde — with two brilliant popular young men like Tornabuoni and Pucci, whose absence would be felt as a haunting vacancy wherever there was a meeting of chief Florentines? It was useless: such pity as could be awakened now was of that hopeless sort which leads not to rescue, but to the tardier action of revenge.

While this scene was passing up-stairs Romola stood below against one of the massive pillars in the court of the palace, expecting the moment when her godfather would appear, on his way to execution. By the use of strong interest she had gained permission to visit him in the evening of this day, and remain with him until the result of the council should be determined. And now she was waiting with his confessor to follow the guard that would lead him to the Bargello. Her heart was bent on clinging to the presence of the childless old man to the last moment, as her father would have done; and she had overpowered all remonstrances. Giovan Battista Ridolfi, a disciple of Savonarola, who was going in bitterness to behold the death of his elder brother Niccolò, had promised that she should be guarded, and now stood by her side.

Tito, too, was in the palace; but Romola had not seen him. Since the evening of the seventeenth they had avoided each other, and Tito only knew by

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inference from the report of the Frate's neutrality that her pleading had failed. He was now surrounded with official and other personages, both Florentine and foreign, who had been awaiting the issue of the long-protracted council, maintaining, except when he was directly addressed, the subdued air and grave silence of a man whom actual events are placing in a painful state of strife between public and private feeling. When an allusion was made to his wife in relation to those events, he implied that, owing to the violent excitement of her mind, the mere fact of his continuing to hold office under a government concerned in her godfather's condemnation, roused in her a diseased hostility towards him; so that for her sake he felt it best not to approach her.

"Ah, the old Bardi blood!" said Cennini, with a shrug. "I shall not be surprised if this business shakes *her* loose from the Frate, as well as some others I could name."

"It is excusable in a woman, who is doubtless beautiful, since she is the wife of Messer Tito," said a young French envoy, smiling and bowing to Tito, "to think that her affections must overrule the good of the State, and that nobody is to be beheaded who is anybody's cousin; but such a view is not to be encouraged in the male population. It seems to me your Florentine polity is much weakened by it."

"That is true," said Niccolò Macchiavelli; "but where personal ties are strong, the hostilities they raise must be taken due account of. Many of these half-way severities are mere hot-headed blundering.

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The only safe blows to be inflicted on men and parties are the blows that are too heavy to be avenged."

"Niccolò," said Cennini, "there is a clever wickedness in thy talk sometimes that makes me mistrust thy pleasant young face as if it were a mask of Satan."

"Not at all, my good Domenico," said Macchiavelli, smiling, and laying his hand on the elder's shoulder. "Satan was a blunderer, an introducer of *novità*, who made a stupendous failure. If he had succeeded, we should all have been worshipping him, and his portrait would have been more flattered."

"Well, well," said Cennini, "I say not thy doctrine is not too clever for Satan: I only say it is wicked enough for him."

"I tell you," said Macchiavelli, "my doctrine is the doctrine of all men who seek an end a little farther off than their own noses. Ask our Frate, our prophet, how his universal renovation is to be brought about: he will tell you, first, by getting a free and pure government; and since it appears that this cannot be done by making all Florentines love each other, it must be done by cutting off every head that happens to be obstinately in the way. Only if a man incurs odium by sanctioning a severity that is not thorough enough to be final, he commits a blunder. And something like that blunder, I suspect, the Frate has committed. It was an occasion on which he might have won some lustre by exerting himself to maintain the Appeal; instead of that, he has lost lustre, and has gained no strength."

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Before any one else could speak, there came the expected announcement that the prisoners were about to leave the council chamber; and the majority of those who were present hurried towards the door, intent on securing the freest passage to the Bargello in the rear of the prisoners' guard; for the scene of the execution was one that drew alike those who were moved by the deepest passions and those who were moved by the coldest curiosity.

Tito was one of those who remained behind. He had a native repugnance to sights of death and pain, and five days ago whenever he had thought of this execution as a possibility he had hoped that it would not take place, and that the utmost sentence would be exile: his own safety demanded no more. But now he felt that it would be a welcome guarantee of his security when he had learned that Bernardo del Nero's head was off the shoulders. The new knowledge and new attitude towards him disclosed by Romola on the day of his return, had given him a new dread of the power she possessed to make his position insecure. If any act of hers only succeeded in making him an object of suspicion and odium, he foresaw not only frustration, but frustration under unpleasant circumstances. Her belief in Baldassarre had clearly determined her wavering feelings against further submission, and if her godfather lived she would win him to share her belief without much trouble. Romola seemed more than ever an unmanageable fact in his destiny. But if Bernardo del Nero were dead, the difficulties that would beset her in placing herself in opposition to her husband

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would probably be insurmountable to her shrinking pride. Therefore Tito had felt easier when he knew that the Eight had gone to the Bargello to order the instant erection of the scaffold. Four other men—his intimates and confederates—were to die, besides Bernardo del Nero. But a man's own safety is a god that sometimes makes very grim demands. Tito felt them to be grim: even in the pursuit of what was agreeable, this paradoxical life forced upon him the desire for what was disagreeable. But he had had other experience of this sort, and as he heard through the open doorway the shuffle of many feet and the clanking of metal on the stairs, he was able to answer the questions of the young French envoy without showing signs of any other feeling than that of sad resignation to State necessities.

Those sounds fell on Romola as if her power of hearing had been exalted along with every other sensibility of her nature. She needed no arm to support her; she shed no tears. She felt that intensity of life which seems to transcend both grief and joy—in which the mind seems to itself akin to elder forces that wrought out existence before the birth of pleasure and pain. Since her godfather's fate had been decided, the previous struggle of feeling in her had given way to an identification of herself with him in these supreme moments: she was inwardly asserting for him that, if he suffered the punishment of treason, he did not deserve the name of traitor; he was the victim to a collision between two kinds of faithfulness. It was not given him to die for the noblest cause, and yet he died because of

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his nobleness. He might have been a meaner man and found it easier not to incur this guilt. Romola was feeling the full force of that sympathy with the individual lot that is continually opposing itself to the formulæ by which actions and parties are judged. She was treading the way with her second father to the scaffold, and nerving herself to defy ignominy by the consciousness that it was not deserved.

The way was fenced in by three hundred armed men, who had been placed as a guard by the orders of Francesco Valori, for among the apparent contradictions that belonged to this event, not the least striking was the alleged alarm on the one hand at the popular rage against the conspirators, and the alleged alarm on the other lest there should be an attempt to rescue them in the midst of a hostile crowd. When they had arrived within the court of the Bargello, Romola was allowed to approach Bernardo with his confessor for a moment of farewell. Many eyes were bent on them even in that struggle of an agitated throng, as the aged man, forgetting that his hands were bound with irons, lifted them towards the golden head that was bent towards him, and then, checking that movement, leaned to kiss her. She seized the fettered hands that were hung down again, and kissed them as if they had been sacred things.

"My poor Romola," said Bernardo, in a low voice, "I have only to die, but thou hast to live—and I shall not be there to help thee."

"Yes," said Romola, hurriedly, "you *will* help me —always—because I shall remember you."

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She was taken away and conducted up the flight of steps that led to the loggia surrounding the grand old court. She took her place there, determined to look till the moment when her godfather laid his head on the block. Now while the prisoners were allowed a brief interval with their confessor, the spectators were pressing into court until the crowd became dense around the black scaffold, and the torches fixed in iron rings against the pillars threw a varying startling light at one moment on passionless stone carvings, at another on some pale face agitated with suppressed rage or suppressed grief—the face of one among the many near relatives of the condemned, who were presently to receive their dead and carry them home.

Romola's face looked like a marble image against the dark arch as she stood watching for the moment when her godfather would appear at the foot of the scaffold. He was to suffer first, and Battista Ridolfi, who was by her side, had promised to take her away through a door behind them when she would have seen the last look of the man who alone in all the world had shared her pitying love for her father. And still, in the background of her thought, there was the possibility striving to be a hope, that some rescue might yet come, something that would keep that scaffold unstained by blood.

For a long while there was constant movement, lights flickering, heads swaying to and fro, confused voices within the court, rushing waves of sound through the entrance from without. It seemed to Romola as if she were in the midst of a storm-

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troubled sea, caring nothing about the storm, caring only to hold out a signal till the eyes that looked for it could seek it no more.

Suddenly there was stillness, and the very tapers seemed to tremble into quiet. The executioner was ready on the scaffold, and Bernardo del Nero was seen ascending it with a slow firm step. Romola made no visible movement, uttered not even a suppressed sound: she stood more firmly, caring for *his* firmness. She saw him pause, saw the white head kept erect, while he said, in a voice distinctly audible—

"It is but a short space of life that my fellow-citizens have taken from me."

She perceived that he was gazing slowly round him as he spoke. She felt that his eyes were resting on her, and that she was stretching out her arms towards him. Then she saw no more till—a long while after, as it seemed—a voice said, "My daughter, all is peace now. I can conduct you to your house."

She uncovered her head and saw her godfather's confessor standing by her, in a room where there were other grave men talking in subdued tones.

"I am ready," she said, starting up. "Let us lose no time."

She thought all clinging was at an end for her: all her strength now should be given to escape from a grasp under which she shuddered.

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CHAPTER LXI.

DRIFTING AWAY.

On the eighth day from that memorable night Romola was standing on the brink of the Mediterranean, watching the gentle summer pulse of the sea just above what was then the little fishing village of Viareggio.

Again she had fled from Florence, and this time no arresting voice had called her back. Again she wore the grey religious dress; and this time, in her heart-sickness, she did not care that it was a disguise. A new rebellion had risen within her, a new despair. Why should she care about wearing one badge more than another, or about being called by her own name? She despaired of finding any consistent duty belonging to that name. What force was there to create for her that supremely hallowed motive which men call duty, but which can have no inward constraining existence save through some form of believing love?

The bonds of all strong affection were snapped. In her marriage, the highest bond of all, she had

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ceased to see the mystic union which is its own guarantee of indissolubleness, had ceased even to see the obligation of a voluntary pledge: had she not proved that the things to which she had pledged herself were impossible? The impulse to set herself free had risen again with overmastering force; yet the freedom could only be an exchange of calamity. There is no compensation for the woman who feels that the chief relation of her life has been no more than a mistake. She has lost her crown. The deepest secret of human blessedness has half whispered itself to her, and then for ever passed her by.

And now Romola's best support under that supreme woman's sorrow had slipped away from her. The vision of any great purpose, any end of existence which could ennoble endurance and exalt the common deeds of a dusty life with divine ardours, was utterly eclipsed for her now by the sense of a confusion in human things which made all effort a mere dragging at tangled threads; all fellowship, either for resistance or advocacy, mere unfairness and exclusiveness. What, after all, was the man who had represented for her the highest heroism: the heroism not of hard, self-contained endurance, but of willing, self-offering love? What was the cause he was struggling for? Romola had lost her trust in Savonarola, had lost that fervour of admiration which had made her unmindful of his aberrations, and attentive only to the grand curve of his orbit. And now that her keen feeling for her godfather had thrown her into antagonism with the Frate, she

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saw all the repulsive and inconsistent details in his teaching with a painful lucidity which exaggerated their proportions. In the bitterness of her disappointment she said that his striving after the renovation of the Church and the world was a striving after a mere name which told no more than the title of a book: a name that had come to mean practically the measures that would strengthen his own position in Florence; nay, often questionable deeds and words, for the sake of saving his influence from suffering by his own errors. And that political reform which had once made a new interest in her life seemed now to reduce itself to narrow devices for the safety of Florence, in contemptible contradiction with the alternating professions of blind trust in the Divine care.

It was inevitable that she should judge the Frate unfairly on a question of individual suffering, at which *she* looked with the eyes of personal tenderness, and *he* with the eyes of theoretic conviction. In that declaration of his, that the cause of his party was the cause of God's kingdom, she heard only the ring of egoism. Perhaps such words have rarely been uttered without that meaner ring in them; yet they are the implicit formula of all energetic belief. And if such energetic belief, pursuing a grand and remote end, is often in danger of becoming a demon-worship, in which the votary lets his son and daughter pass through the fire with a readiness that hardly looks like sacrifice; tender fellow-feeling for the nearest has its danger too, and is apt to be timid and sceptical towards the larger aims without which life can-

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not rise into religion. In this way poor Romola was being blinded by her tears.

No one who has ever known what it is thus to lose faith in a fellow-man whom he has profoundly loved and reverenced, will lightly say that the shock can leave the faith in the Invisible Goodness unshaken. With the sinking of high human trust, the dignity of life sinks too; we cease to believe in our own better self, since that also is part of the common nature which is degraded in our thought; and all the finer impulses of the soul are dulled. Romola felt even the springs of her once active pity drying up, and leaving her to barren egoistic complaining. Had not *she* had her sorrows too? And few had cared for her, while she had cared for many. She had done enough; she had striven after the impossible, and was weary of this stifling crowded life. She longed for that repose in mere sensation which she had sometimes dreamed of in the sultry afternoons of her early girlhood, when she had fancied herself floating naïad-like in the waters.

The clear waves seemed to invite her: she wished she could lie down to sleep on them and pass from sleep into death. But Romola could not directly seek death; the fulness of young life in her forbade that. She could only wish that death would come.

At the spot where she had paused there was a deep bend in the shore, and a small boat with a sail was moored there. In her longing to glide over the waters that were getting golden with the level sunrays, she thought of a story which had been one of the things she had loved to dwell on in Boccaccio, when

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her father fell asleep and she glided from her stool to sit on the floor and read the 'Decamerone.' It was the story of that fair Gostanza who in her love-lornness desired to live no longer, but not having the courage to attack her young life, had put herself into a boat and pushed off to sea; then, lying down in the boat, had wrapt her mantle round her head, hoping to be wrecked, so that her fear would be helpless to flee from death. The memory had remained a mere thought in Romola's mind, without budding into any distinct wish; but now, as she paused again in her walking to and fro, she saw gliding black against the red gold another boat with one man in it, making towards the bend where the first and smaller boat was moored. Walking on again, she at length saw the man land, pull his boat ashore and begin to unlade something from it. He was perhaps the owner of the smaller boat also: he would be going away soon, and her opportunity would be gone with him—her opportunity of buying that smaller boat. She had not yet admitted to herself that she meant to use it, but she felt a sudden eagerness to secure the possibility of using it, which disclosed the half-unconscious growth of a thought into a desire.

"Is that little boat yours also?" she said to the fisherman, who had looked up, a little startled by the tall grey figure, and had made a reverence to this holy Sister wandering thus mysteriously in the evening solitude.

It *was* his boat; an old one, hardly seaworthy, yet worth repairing to any man who would buy it.

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By the blessing of San Antonio, whose chapel was in the village yonder, his fishing had prospered, and he had now a better boat, which had once been Gianni's who died. But he had not yet sold the old one. Romola asked him how much it was worth, and then, while he was busy, thrust the price into a little satchel lying on the ground and containing the remnant of his dinner. After that, she watched him furling his sail and asked him how he should set it if he wanted to go out to sea, and then pacing up and down again, waited to see him depart.

The imagination of herself gliding away in that boat on the darkening waters was growing more and more into a longing, as the thought of a cool brook in sultriness becomes a painful thirst. To be freed from the burden of choice when all motive was bruised, to commit herself, sleeping, to destiny which would either bring death or else new necessities that might rouse a new life in her!—it was a thought that beckoned her the more because the soft evening air made her long to rest in the still solitude, instead of going back to the noise and heat of the village.

At last the slow fisherman had gathered up all his movables and was walking away. Soon the gold was shrinking and getting duskier in sea and sky, and there was no living thing in sight, no sound but the lulling monotony of the lapping waves. In this sea there was no tide that would help to carry her away if she waited for its ebb; but Romola thought the breeze from the land was

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rising a little. She got into the boat, unfurled the sail, and fastened it as she had learned in that first brief lesson. She saw that it caught the light breeze, and this was all she cared for. Then she loosed the boat from its moorings, and tried to urge it with an oar, till she was far out from the land, till the sea was dark even to the west, and the stars were disclosing themselves like a palpitating life over the wide heavens. Resting at last, she threw back her cowl, and, taking off the kerchief underneath, which confined her hair, she doubled them both under her head for a pillow on one of the boat's ribs. The fair head was still very young and could bear a hard pillow.

And so she lay, with the soft night air breathing on her while she glided on the water and watched the deepening quiet of the sky. She was alone now: she had freed herself from all claims, she had freed herself even from that burden of choice which presses with heavier and heavier weight when claims have loosed their guiding hold.

Had she found anything like the dream of her girlhood? No. Memories hung upon her like the weight of broken wings that could never be lifted —memories of human sympathy which even in its pains leaves a thirst that the Great Mother has no milk to still. Romola felt orphaned in those wide spaces of sea and sky. She read no message of love for her in that far-off symbolic writing of the heavens, and with a great sob she wished that she might be gliding into death.

She drew the cowl over her head again and covered

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her face, choosing darkness rather than the light of the stars, which seemed to her like the hard light of eyes that looked at her without seeing her. Presently she felt that she was in the grave, but not resting there: she was touching the hands of the beloved dead beside her, and trying to wake them.

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CHAPTER LXII.

THE BENEDICTION.

About ten o'clock on the morning of the twenty-seventh of February the currents of passengers along the Florentine streets set decidedly towards San Marco. It was the last morning of the Carnival, and every one knew there was a second Bonfire of Vanities being prepared in front of the Old Palace; but at this hour it was evident that the centre of popular interest lay elsewhere.

The Piazza di San Marco was filled by a multitude who showed no other movement than that which proceeded from the pressure of new-comers trying to force their way forward from all the openings: but the front ranks were already close-serried and resisted the pressure. Those ranks were ranged around a semicircular barrier in front of the church, and within this barrier were already assembling the Dominican Brethren of San Marco.

But the temporary wooden pulpit erected over the church-door was still empty. It was presently to be entered by the man whom the Pope's command

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had banished from the pulpit of the Duomo, whom the other ecclesiastics of Florence had been forbidden to consort with, whom the citizens had been forbidden to hear on pain of excommunication. This man had said, "A wicked, unbelieving Pope who has gained the pontifical chair by bribery is not Christ's Vicar. His curses are broken swords: he grasps a hilt without a blade. His commands are contrary to the Christian life: it is lawful to disobey them—nay, *it is not lawful to obey them.*" And the people still flocked to hear him as he preached in his own church of San Marco, though the Pope was hanging terrible threats over Florence if it did not renounce the pestilential schismatic and send him to Rome to be "converted"—still, as on this very morning, accepted the Communion from his excommunicated hands. For how if this Frate had really more command over the Divine lightnings than that official successor of Saint Peter? It was a momentous question, which for the mass of citizens could never be decided by the Frate's ultimate test, namely, what was and what was not accordant with the highest spiritual law. No: in such a case as this, if God had chosen the Frate as his prophet to rebuke the High Priest who carried the mystic raiment unworthily, he would attest his choice by some unmistakable sign. As long as the belief in the Prophet carried no threat of outward calamity, but rather the confident hope of exceptional safety, no sign was needed: his preaching was a music to which the people felt themselves marching along the way they wished to go; but now that belief meant

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an immediate blow to their commerce, the shaking of their position among the Italian States, and an interdict on their city, there inevitably came the question, "What miracle showest thou?" Slowly at first, then faster and faster, that fatal demand had been swelling in Savonarola's ear, provoking a response, outwardly in the declaration that at the fitting time the miracle would come; inwardly in the faith—not unwavering, for what faith is so?—that if the need for miracle became urgent, the work he had before him was too great for the Divine power to leave it halting. His faith wavered, but not his speech: it is the lot of every man who has to speak for the satisfaction of the crowd, that he must often speak in virtue of yesterday's faith, hoping it will come back to-morrow.

It was in preparation for a scene which was really a response to the popular impatience for some supernatural guarantee of the Prophet's mission, that the wooden pulpit had been erected above the church-door. But while the ordinary Frati in black mantles were entering and arranging themselves, the faces of the multitude were not yet eagerly directed towards the pulpit: it was felt that Savonarola would not appear just yet, and there was some interest in singling out the various monks, some of them belonging to high Florentine families, many of them having fathers, brothers, or cousins among the artisans and shopkeepers who made the majority of the crowd. It was not till the tale of monks was complete, not till they had fluttered their books and had begun to

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chant, that people said to each other, "Fra Girolamo must be coming now."

That expectation rather than any spell from the accustomed wail of psalmody was what made silence and expectation seem to spread like a paling solemn light over the multitude of upturned faces, all now directed towards the empty pulpit.

The next instant the pulpit was no longer empty. A figure covered from head to foot in black cowl and mantle had entered it, and was kneeling with bent head and with face turned away. It seemed a weary time to the eager people while the black figure knelt and the monks chanted. But the stillness was not broken, for the Frate's audiences with Heaven were yet charged with electric awe for that mixed multitude, so that those who had already the will to stone him felt their arms unnerved.

At last there was a vibration among the multitude, each seeming to give his neighbour a momentary aspen-like touch, as when men who have been watching for something in the heavens see the expected presence silently disclosing itself. The Frate had risen, turned towards the people, and partly pushed back his cowl. The monotonous wail of psalmody had ceased, and to those who stood near the pulpit, it was as if the sounds which had just been filling their ears had suddenly merged themselves in the force of Savonarola's flashing glance, as he looked round him in the silence. Then he stretched out his hands, which, in their exquisite delicacy, seemed transfigured from an animal organ for grasping into

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vehicles of sensibility too acute to need any gross contact: hands that came like an appealing speech from that part of his soul which was masked by his strong passionate face, written on now with deeper lines about the mouth and brow than are made by forty-four years of ordinary life.

At the first stretching out of the hands some of the crowd in the front ranks fell on their knees, and here and there a devout disciple farther off; but the great majority stood firm, some resisting the impulse to kneel before this excommunicated man (might not a great judgment fall upon him even in this act of blessing?)—others jarred with scorn and hatred of the ambitious deceiver who was getting up this new comedy, before which, nevertheless, they felt themselves impotent, as before the triumph of a fashion.

But then came the voice, clear and low at first, uttering the words of absolution—"*Misereatur vestri*"—and more fell on their knees: and as it rose higher and yet clearer, the erect heads became fewer and fewer, till, at the words "*Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus*," it rose to a masculine cry, as if protesting its power to bless under the clutch of a demon that wanted to stifle it: it rang like a trumpet to the extremities of the Piazza, and under it every head was bowed.

After the utterance of that blessing, Savonarola himself fell on his knees and hid his face in temporary exhaustion. Those great jets of emotion were a necessary part of his life; he himself had said to the people long ago, "Without preaching I cannot live." But it was a life that shattered him.

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In a few minutes more, some had risen to their feet, but a larger number remained kneeling, and all faces were intently watching him. He had taken into his hands a crystal vessel, containing the consecrated Host, and was about to address the people.

"You remember, my children, three days ago I besought you, when I should hold this Sacrament in my hand in the face of you all, to pray fervently to the Most High that if this work of mine does not come from Him, He will send a fire and consume me, that I may vanish into the eternal darkness away from His light which I have hidden with my falsity. Again I beseech you to make that prayer, and to make it *now*."

It was a breathless moment: perhaps no man really prayed, if some in a spirit of devout obedience made the effort to pray. Every consciousness was chiefly possessed by the sense that Savonarola was praying, in a voice not loud, but distinctly audible in the wide stillness.

"Lord, if I have not wrought in sincerity of soul, if my word cometh not from Thee, strike me in this moment with Thy thunder, and let the fires of Thy wrath enclose me."

He ceased to speak, and stood motionless, with the consecrated Mystery in his hand, with eyes uplifted and a quivering excitement in his whole aspect. Every one else was motionless and silent too, while the sunlight, which for the last quarter of an hour had here and there been piercing the greyness, made fitful streaks across the convent wall, causing some awe-stricken spectators to start timidly.

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But soon there was a wider parting, and with a gentle quickness, like a smile, a stream of brightness poured itself on the crystal vase, and then spread itself over Savonarola's face with mild glorification.

An instantaneous shout rang through the Piazza, "Behold the answer!"

The warm radiance thrilled through Savonarola's frame, and so did the shout. It was his last moment of untroubled triumph, and in its rapturous confidence he felt carried to a grander scene yet to come, before an audience that would represent all Christendom, in whose presence he should again be sealed as the messenger of the supreme righteousness, and feel himself full charged with Divine strength. It was but a moment that expanded itself in that prevision. While the shout was still ringing in his ears he turned away within the church, feeling the strain too great for him to bear it longer.

But when the Frate had disappeared, and the sunlight seemed no longer to have anything special in its illumination, but was spreading itself impartially over all things clean and unclean, there began, along with the general movement of the crowd, a confusion of voices in which certain strong discords and varying scales of laughter made it evident that, in the previous silence and universal kneeling, hostility and scorn had only submitted unwillingly to a momentary spell.

"It seems to me the plaudits are giving way to criticism," said Tito, who had been watching the

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scene attentively from an upper loggia in one of the houses opposite the church. "Nevertheless it was a striking moment, eh, Messer Pietro? Fra Girolamo is a man to make one understand that there was a time when the monk's frock was a symbol of power over men's minds rather than over the keys of women's cupboards."

"Assuredly," said Pietro Cennini. "And until I have seen proof that Fra Girolamo has much less faith in God's judgments than the common run of men, instead of having considerably more, I shall not believe that he would brave Heaven in this way if his soul were laden with a conscious lie."

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CHAPTER LXIII.

RIPENING SCHEMES.

A MONTH after that Carnival, one morning near the end of March, Tito descended the marble steps of the Old Palace, bound on a pregnant errand to San Marco. For some reason, he did not choose to take the direct road, which was but a slightly-bent line from the Old Palace; he chose rather to make a circuit by the Piazza di Santa Croce, where the people would be pouring out of the church after the early sermon.

It was in the grand church of Santa Croce that the daily Lenten sermon had of late had the largest audience. For Savonarola's voice had ceased to be heard even in his own church of San Marco, a hostile Signoria having imposed silence on him in obedience to a new letter from the Pope, threatening the city with an immediate interdict if this "wretched worm" and "monstrous idol" were not forbidden to preach, and sent to demand pardon at Rome. And next to hearing Fra Girolamo himself, the most exciting Lenten occupation was to hear him argued against

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and vilified. This excitement was to be had in Santa Croce, where the Franciscan appointed to preach the Quaresimal sermons had offered to clench his arguments by walking through the fire with Fra Girolamo. Had not that schismatical Dominican said, that his prophetic doctrine would be proved by a miracle at the fitting time? Here, then, was the fitting time. Let Savonarola walk through the fire, and if he came out unhurt, the Divine origin of his doctrine would be demonstrated; but if the fire consumed him, his falsity would be manifest; and that he might have no excuse for evading the test, the Franciscan declared himself willing to be a victim to this high logic, and to be burned for the sake of securing the necessary minor premiss.

Savonarola, according to his habit, had taken no notice of these pulpit attacks. But it happened that the zealous preacher of Santa Croce was no other than the Fra Francesco di Puglia, who at Prato the year before had been engaged in a like challenge with Savonarola's fervent follower Fra Domenico, but had been called home by his superiors while the heat was simply oratorical. Honest Fra Domenico, then, who was preaching Lenten sermons to the women in the Via del Cocomero, no sooner heard of this new challenge, than he took up the gauntlet for his master, and declared himself ready to walk through the fire with Fra Francesco. Already the people were beginning to take a strong interest in what seemed to them a short and easy method of argument (for those who were to be convinced), when Savonarola, keenly

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alive to the dangers that lay in the mere discussion of the case, commanded Fra Domenico to withdraw his acceptance of the challenge and secede from the affair. The Franciscan declared himself content: he had not directed his challenge to any subaltern, but to Fra Girolamo himself.

After that, the popular interest in the Lenten sermons had flagged a little. But this morning, when Tito entered the Piazza di Santa Croce, he found, as he expected, that the people were pouring from the church in large numbers. Instead of dispersing, many of them concentrated themselves towards a particular spot near the entrance of the Franciscan monastery, and Tito took the same direction, threading the crowd with a careless and leisurely air, but keeping careful watch on that monastic entrance, as if he expected some object of interest to issue from it.

It was no such expectation that occupied the crowd. The object they were caring about was already visible to them in the shape of a large placard, affixed by order of the Signoria, and covered with very legible official handwriting. But curiosity was somewhat balked by the fact that the manuscript was chiefly in Latin, and though nearly every man knew beforehand approximately what the placard contained, he had an appetite for more exact knowledge, which gave him an irritating sense of his neighbour's ignorance in not being able to interpret the learned tongue. For that aural acquaintance with Latin phrases which the unlearned might pick up from pulpit quotations con-

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stantly interpreted by the preacher could help them little when they saw written Latin; the spelling even of the modern language being in an unorganised and scrambling condition for the mass of people who could read and write,[1] while the majority of those assembled nearest to the placard were not in the dangerous predicament of possessing that little knowledge.

"It's the Frate's doctrines that he's to prove by being burned," said that large public character Goro, who happened to be among the foremost gazers. "The Signoria has taken it in hand, and the writing is to let us know. It's what the Padre has been telling us about in his sermon."

"Nay, Goro," said a sleek shopkeeper, compassionately, "thou hast got thy legs into twisted hose there. The Frate has to prove his doctrines by *not* being burned: he is to walk through the fire, and come out on the other side sound and whole."

"Yes, yes," said a young sculptor, who wore his white-streaked cap and tunic with a jaunty air. "But Fra Girolamo objects to walking through the fire. Being sound and whole already, he sees no reason why he should walk through the fire to come out in just the same condition. He leaves such odds and ends of work to Fra Domenico."

"Then I say he flinches like a coward," said Goro, in a wheezy treble. "Suffocation! that was what he did at the Carnival. He had us all in the Piazza

[1] The old diarists throw in their consonants with a regard rather to quantity than position, well typified by the *Ragnolo Braghiello* (Agnolo Gabriello) of Boccaccio's Ferondo.

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to see the lightning strike him, and nothing came of it."

"Stop that bleating," said a tall shoemaker, who had stepped in to hear part of the sermon, with bunches of slippers hanging over his shoulders. "It seems to me, friend, that you are about as wise as a calf with water on its brain. The Frate will flinch from nothing: he'll say nothing beforehand, perhaps, but when the moment comes he'll walk through the fire without asking any grey-frock to keep him company. But I would give a shoestring to know what this Latin all is."

"There's so much of it," said the shopkeeper, "else I'm pretty good at guessing. Is there no scholar to be seen?" he added, with a slight expression of disgust.

There was a general turning of heads, which caused the talkers to descry Tito approaching in their rear.

"Here is one," said the young sculptor, smiling and raising his cap.

"It is the secretary of the Ten: he is going to the convent, doubtless; make way for him," said the shopkeeper, also doffing, though that mark of respect was rarely shown by Florentines except to the highest officials. The exceptional reverence was really exacted by the splendour and grace of Tito's appearance, which made his black mantle, with its gold fibula, look like a regal robe, and his ordinary black velvet cap like an entirely exceptional head-dress. The hardening of his cheeks and mouth, which was the chief change in his face

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since he came to Florence, seemed to a superficial glance only to give his beauty a more masculine character. He raised his own cap immediately and said—

"Thanks, my friend, I merely wished, as you did, to see what is at the foot of this placard—ah, it is as I expected. I had been informed that the government permits any one who will, to subscribe his name as a candidate to enter the fire—which is an act of liberality worthy of the magnificent Signoria—reserving of course the right to make a selection. And doubtless many believers will be eager to subscribe their names. For what is it to enter the fire, to one whose faith is firm? A man is afraid of the fire, because he believes it will burn him; but if he believes the contrary?"—here Tito lifted his shoulders and made an oratorical pause—"for which reason I have never been one to disbelieve the Frate, when he has said that he would enter the fire to prove his doctrine. For in his place, if you believed the fire would not burn you, which of you, my friends, would not enter it as readily as you would walk along the dry bed of the Mugnone?"

As Tito looked round him during this appeal, there was a change in some of his audience very much like the change in an eager dog when he is invited to smell something pungent. Since the question of burning was becoming practical, it was not every one who would rashly commit himself to any general view of the relation between faith and fire. The scene might have been too much for a gravity less under command than Tito's.

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"Then, Messer Segretario," said the young sculptor, "it seems to me Fra Francesco is the greater hero, for he offers to enter the fire for the truth, though he is sure the fire will burn him."

"I do not deny it," said Tito, blandly. "But if it turns out that Fra Francesco is mistaken, he will have been burned for the wrong side, and the Church has never reckoned such victims to be martyrs. We must suspend our judgment until the trial has really taken place."

"It is true, Messer Segretario," said the shopkeeper, with subdued impatience. "But will you favour us by interpreting the Latin?"

"Assuredly," said Tito. "It does but express the conclusions or doctrines which the Frate specially teaches, and which the trial by fire is to prove true or false. They are doubtless familiar to you. First, that Florence——"

"Let us have the Latin bit by bit, and then tell us what it means," said the shoemaker, who had been a frequent hearer of Fra Girolamo.

"Willingly," said Tito, smiling. "You will then judge if I give you the right meaning."

"Yes, yes; that's fair," said Goro.

"*Ecclesia Dei indiget renovatione;* that is, the Church of God needs purifying or regenerating."

"It is true," said several voices at once.

"That means, the priests ought to lead better lives; there needs no miracle to prove that. That's what the Frate has always been saying," said the shoemaker.

"*Flagellabitur,*" Tito went on. "That is, it will be

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scourged. *Renovabitur:* it will be purified. *Florentia quoque post flagellam renovabitur et prosperabitur:* Florence also, after the scourging, shall be purified and shall prosper."

"That means we are to get Pisa again," said the shopkeeper.

"And get the wool from England as we used to do, I should hope," said an elderly man, in an old-fashioned berretta, who had been silent till now. "There's been scourging enough with the sinking of the trade."

At this moment, a tall personage, surmounted by a red feather, issued from the door of the convent, and exchanged an indifferent glance with Tito; who, tossing his becchetto carelessly over his left shoulder, turned to his reading again, while the bystanders, with more timidity than respect, shrank to make a passage for Messer Dolfo Spini.

"*Infideles convertentur ad Christum,*" Tito went on. "That is, the infidels shall be converted to Christ."

"Those are the Turks and the Moors. Well, I've nothing to say against that," said the shopkeeper, dispassionately.

"*Hæc autem omnia erunt temporibus nostris:* and all these things shall happen in our times."

"Why, what use would they be else?" said Goro.

"*Excommunicatio nuper lata contra Reverendum Patrem nostrum Fratrem Hieronymum nulla est:* the excommunication lately pronounced against our reverend father, Fra Girolamo, is null. *Non observantes eam non peccant:* those who disregard it are not committing a sin."

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"I shall know better what to say to that when we have had the Trial by Fire," said the shopkeeper.

"Which doubtless will clear up everything," said Tito. "That is all the Latin—all the conclusions that are to be proved true or false by the trial. The rest you can perceive is simply a proclamation of the Signoria in good Tuscan, calling on such as are eager to walk through the fire, to come to the Palazzo and subscribe their names. Can I serve you further? If not——"

Tito, as he turned away, raised his cap and bent slightly, with so easy an air that the movement seemed a natural prompting of deference.

He quickened his pace as he left the Piazza, and after two or three turnings he paused in a quiet street before a door at which he gave a light and peculiar knock. It was opened by a young woman whom he chucked under the chin as he asked her if the Padrone was within, and he then passed, without further ceremony, through another door which stood ajar on his right hand. It admitted him into a handsome but untidy room, where Dolfo Spini sat playing with a fine stag-hound which alternately snuffed at a basket of pups and licked his hands with that affectionate disregard of her master's morals sometimes held to be one of the most agreeable attributes of her sex. He just looked up as Tito entered, but continued his play, simply from that disposition to persistence in some irrelevant action, by which slow-witted sensual people seem to be continually counteracting their own purposes. Tito was patient.

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"A handsome *bracca* that," he said, quietly, standing with his thumbs in his belt. Presently he added, in that cool liquid tone which seemed mild, but compelled attention, "When you have finished such caresses as cannot possibly be deferred, my Dolfo, we will talk of business, if you please. My time, which I could wish to be eternity at your service, is not entirely my own this morning."

"Down, Mischief, down!" said Spini, with sudden roughness. "Malediction!" he added, still more gruffly, pushing the dog aside; then, starting from his seat, he stood close to Tito, and put a hand on his shoulder as he spoke.

"I hope your sharp wits see all the ins and outs of this business, my fine necromancer, for it seems to me no clearer than the bottom of a sack."

"What is your difficulty, my cavalier?"

"These accursed Frati Minori at Santa Croce. They are drawing back now. Fra Francesco himself seems afraid of sticking to his challenge; talks of the Prophet being likely to use magic to get up a false miracle—thinks he himself might be dragged into the fire and burned, and the Prophet might come out whole by magic, and the Church be none the better. And then, after all our talking, there's not so much as a blessed lay brother who will offer himself to pair with that pious sheep Fra Domenico."

"It is the peculiar stupidity of the tonsured skull that prevents them from seeing of how little consequence it is whether they are burned or not," said Tito. "Have you sworn well to them that they shall be in no danger of entering the fire?"

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"No," said Spini, looking puzzled; "because one of them will be obliged to go in with Fra Domenico, who thinks it a thousand years till the fagots are ready."

"Not at all. Fra Domenico himself is not likely to go in. I have told you before, my Dolfo, only your powerful mind is not to be impressed without more repetition than suffices for the vulgar—I have told you that now you have got the Signoria to take up this affair and prevent it from being hushed up by Fra Girolamo, nothing is necessary but that on a given day the fuel should be prepared in the Piazza, and the people got together with the expectation of seeing something prodigious. If, after that, the Prophet quits the Piazza without any appearance of a miracle on his side, he is ruined with the people: they will be ready to pelt him out of the city, the Signoria will find it easy to banish him from the territory, and his Holiness may do as he likes with him. Therefore, my Alcibiades, swear to the Franciscans that their grey frocks shall not come within singeing distance of the fire."

Spini rubbed the back of his head with one hand, and tapped his sword against his leg with the other, to stimulate his power of seeing these intangible combinations.

"But," he said presently, looking up again, "unless we fall on him in the Piazza, when the people are in a rage, and make an end of him and his lies then and there, Valori and the Salviati and the Albizzi will take up arms and raise a fight for him. I know that was talked of when there was the hubbub on

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Ascension Sunday. And the people may turn round again: there may be a story raised of the French king coming again, or some other cursed chance in the hypocrite's favour. The city will never be safe till he's out of it."

"He *will* be out of it before long, without your giving yourself any further trouble than this little comedy of the Trial by Fire. The wine and the sun will make vinegar without any shouting to help them, as your Florentine sages would say. You will have the satisfaction of delivering your city from an incubus by an able stratagem, instead of risking blunders with sword-thrusts."

"But suppose he *did* get magic and the devil to help him, and walk through the fire after all?" said Spini, with a grimace intended to hide a certain shyness in trenching on this speculative ground. "How do you know there's nothing in those things? Plenty of scholars believe in them, and this Frate is bad enough for anything."

"Oh, of course there are such things," said Tito, with a shrug: "but I have particular reasons for knowing that the Frate is not on such terms with the devil as can give him any confidence in this affair. The only magic he relies on is his own ability."

"Ability!" said Spini. "Do you call it ability to be setting Florence at loggerheads with the Pope and all the powers of Italy—all to keep beckoning at the French king who never comes? You may call him able, but I call him a hypocrite, who wants to be master of everybody, and get himself made Pope."

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"You judge with your usual penetration, my captain, but our opinions do not clash. The Frate, wanting to be master, and to carry out his projects against the Pope, requires the lever of a foreign power, and requires Florence as a fulcrum. I used to think him a narrow-minded bigot, but now, I think him a shrewd ambitious man who knows what he is aiming at, and directs his aim as skilfully as you direct a ball when you are playing at *maglio*."

"Yes, yes," said Spini, cordially, "I can aim a ball."

"It is true," said Tito, with bland gravity; "and I should not have troubled you with my trivial remark on the Frate's ability, but that you may see how this will heighten the credit of your success against him at Rome and at Milan, which is sure to serve you in good stead when the city comes to change its policy."

"Well, thou art a good little demon, and shalt have good pay," said Spini, patronisingly; whereupon he thought it only natural that the useful Greek adventurer should smile with gratification as he said—

"Of course, any advantage to me depends entirely on your——"

"We shall have our supper at my palace to-night," interrupted Spini, with a significant nod and an affectionate pat on Tito's shoulder, "and I shall expound the new scheme to them all."

"Pardon, my magnificent patron," said Tito; "the scheme has been the same from the first—it has

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never varied except in your memory. Are you sure you have fast hold of it now?"

Spini rehearsed.

"One thing more," he said, as Tito was hastening away. "There is that sharp-nosed notary, Ser Ceccone; he has been handy of late. Tell me, you who can see a man wink when you're behind him, do you think I may go on making use of him?"

Tito dared not say "No." He knew his companion too well to trust him with advice when all Spini's vanity and self-interest were not engaged in concealing the adviser.

"Doubtless," he answered, promptly. "I have nothing to say against Ceccone."

That suggestion of the notary's intimate access to Spini caused Tito a passing twinge, interrupting his amused satisfaction in the success with which he made a tool of the man who fancied himself a patron. For he had been rather afraid of Ser Ceccone. Tito's nature made him peculiarly alive to circumstances that might be turned to his disadvantage; his memory was much haunted by such possibilities, stimulating him to contrivances by which he might ward them off. And it was not likely that he should forget that October morning more than a year ago, when Romola had appeared suddenly before him at the door of Nello's shop, and had compelled him to declare his certainty that Fra Girolamo was not going outside the gates. The fact that Ser Ceccone had been a witness of that scene, together with Tito's perception that for some reason or other he

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was an object of dislike to the notary, had received a new importance from the recent turn of events. For after having been implicated in the Medicean plots, and having found it advisable in consequence to retire into the country for some time, Ser Ceccone had of late, since his reappearance in the city, attached himself to the Arrabbiati, and cultivated the patronage of Dolfo Spini. Now that captain of the Compagnacci was much given, when in the company of intimates, to confidential narrative about his own doings, and if Ser Ceccone's powers of combination were sharpened by enmity, he might gather some knowledge which he could use against Tito with very unpleasant results.

It would be pitiable to be balked in well-conducted schemes by an insignificant notary; to be lamed by the sting of an insect whom he had offended unawares. "But," Tito said to himself, "the man's dislike to me can be nothing deeper than the ill-humour of a dinnerless dog; I shall conquer it if I can make him prosperous." And he had been very glad of an opportunity which had presented itself of providing the notary with a temporary post as an extra *cancelliere* or registering secretary under the Ten, believing that with this sop and the expectation of more, the waspish cur must be quite cured of the disposition to bite him.

But perfect scheming demands omniscience, and the notary's envy had been stimulated into hatred by causes of which Tito knew nothing. That evening when Tito, returning from his critical audience

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with the Special Council, had brushed by Ser Ceccone on the stairs, the notary, who had only just returned from Pistoja, and learned the arrest of the conspirators, was bound on an errand which bore a humble resemblance to Tito's. He also, without giving up a show of popular zeal, had been putting in the Medicean lottery. He also had been privy to the unexecuted plot, and was willing to tell what he knew, but knew much less to tell. He also would have been willing to go on treacherous errands, but a more eligible agent had forestalled him. His propositions were received coldly; the council, he was told, was already in possession of the needed information, and since he had been thus busy in sedition, it would be well for him to retire out of the way of mischief, otherwise the government might be obliged to take note of him. Ser Ceccone wanted no evidence to make him attribute his failure to Tito, and his spite was the more bitter because the nature of the case compelled him to hold his peace about it. Nor was this the whole of his grudge against the flourishing Melema. On issuing from his hiding-place, and attaching himself to the Arrabbiati, he had earned some pay as one of the spies who reported information on Florentine affairs to the Milanese court; but his pay had been small, notwithstanding his pains to write full letters, and he had lately been apprised that his news was seldom more than a late and imperfect edition of what was known already. Now Ser Ceccone had no positive knowledge that Tito had an underhand connection with the Arrabbiati and the Court of

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Milan, but he had a suspicion of which he chewed the cud with as strong a sense of flavour as if it had been a certainty.

This fine-grown vigorous hatred could swallow the feeble opiate of Tito's favours, and be as lively as ever after it. Why should Ser Ceccone like Melema any the better for doing him favours? Doubtless the suave secretary had his own ends to serve; and what right had he to the superior position which made it possible for him to show favour? But since he had tuned his voice to flattery, Ser Ceccone would pitch his in the same key, and it remained to be seen who would win at the game of outwitting.

To have a mind well oiled with that sort of argument which prevents any claim from grasping it, seems eminently convenient sometimes; only the oil becomes objectionable when we find it anointing other minds on which we want to establish a hold.

Tito, however, not being quite omniscient, felt now no more than a passing twinge of uneasiness at the suggestion of Ser Ceccone's power to hurt him. It was only for a little while that he cared greatly about keeping clear of suspicions and hostility. He was now playing his final game in Florence, and the skill he was conscious of applying gave him a pleasure in it even apart from the expected winnings. The errand on which he was bent to San Marco was a stroke in which he felt so much confidence that he had already given notice to the Ten of his desire to resign his office at an indefinite period within the next month or two, and had

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obtained permission to make that resignation suddenly, if his affairs needed it, with the understanding that Niccolò Macchiavelli was to be his provisional substitute, if not his successor. He was acting on hypothetic grounds, but this was the sort of action that had the keenest interest for his diplomatic mind. From a combination of general knowledge concerning Savonarola's purposes with diligently observed details he had framed a conjecture which he was about to verify by this visit to San Marco. If he proved to be right, his game would be won, and he might soon turn his back on Florence. He looked eagerly towards that consummation, for many circumstances besides his own weariness of the place told him that it was time for him to be gone.

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CHAPTER LXIV.

THE PROPHET IN HIS CELL.

Tito's visit to San Marco had been announced beforehand, and he was at once conducted by Fra Niccolò, Savonarola's secretary, up the spiral staircase into the long corridors lined with cells—corridors where Fra Angelico's frescoes, delicate as the rainbow on the melting cloud, startled the unaccustomed eye here and there, as if they had been sudden reflections cast from an ethereal world, where the Madonna sat crowned in her radiant glory, and the Divine infant looked forth with perpetual promise.

It was an hour of relaxation in the monastery, and most of the cells were empty. The light through the narrow windows looked in on nothing but bare walls, and the hard pallet and the crucifix. And even behind that door at the end of a long corridor, in the inner cell opening from an antechamber where the Prior usually sat at his desk or received private visitors, the high jet of light fell on only one more object that looked quite as common

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a monastic sight as the bare walls and hard pallet. It was but the back of a figure in the long white Dominican tunic and scapulary, kneeling with bowed head before a crucifix. It might have been any ordinary Fra Girolamo, who had nothing worse to confess than thinking of wrong things when he was singing *in coro*, or feeling a spiteful joy when Fra Benedetto dropped the ink over his own miniatures in the breviary he was illuminating—who had no higher thought than that of climbing safely into Paradise up the narrow ladder of prayer, fasting, and obedience. But under this particular white tunic there was a heart beating with a consciousness inconceivable to the average monk, and perhaps hard to be conceived by any man who has not arrived at self-knowledge through a tumultuous inner life: a consciousness in which irrevocable errors and lapses from veracity were so entwined with noble purposes and sincere beliefs, in which self-justifying expediency was so inwoven with the tissue of a great work which the whole being seemed as unable to abandon as the body was unable to abandon glowing and trembling before the objects of hope and fear, that it was perhaps impossible, whatever course might be adopted, for the conscience to find perfect repose.

Savonarola was not only in the attitude of prayer, there were Latin words of prayer on his lips; and yet he was not praying. He had entered his cell, had fallen on his knees, and burst into words of supplication, seeking in this way for an influx of calmness which would be a warrant to him that the

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resolutions urged on him by crowding thoughts and passions were not wresting him away from the Divine support; but the previsions and impulses which had been at work within him for the last hour were too imperious; and while he pressed his hands against his face, and while his lips were uttering audibly, "*Cor mundum crea in me*," his mind was still filled with the images of the snare his enemies had prepared for him, was still busy with the arguments by which he could justify himself against their taunts and accusations.

And it was not only against his opponents that Savonarola had to defend himself. This morning he had had new proof that his friends and followers were as much inclined to urge on the Trial by Fire as his enemies: desiring and tacitly expecting that he himself would at last accept the challenge and evoke the long-expected miracle which was to dissipate doubt and triumph over malignity. Had he not said that God would declare himself at the fitting time? And to the understanding of plain Florentines, eager to get party questions settled, it seemed that no time could be more fitting than this. Certainly, if Fra Domenico walked through the fire unhurt, *that* would be a miracle, and the faith and ardour of that good brother were felt to be a cheering augury; but Savonarola was acutely conscious that the secret longing of his followers to see him accept the challenge had not been dissipated by any reasons he had given for his refusal.

Yet it was impossible to him to satisfy them; and with bitter distress he saw now that it was impos-

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sible for him any longer to resist the prosecution of the trial in Fra Domenico's case. Not that Savonarola had uttered and written a falsity when he declared his belief in a future supernatural attestation of his work; but his mind was so constituted that while it was easy for him to believe in a miracle which, being distant and undefined, was screened behind the strong reasons he saw for its occurrence, and yet easier for him to have a belief in inward miracles such as his own prophetic inspiration and divinely-wrought intuitions; it was at the same time insurmountably difficult to him to believe in the probability of a miracle which, like this of being carried unhurt through the fire, pressed in all its details on his imagination and involved a demand not only for belief but for exceptional action.

Savonarola's nature was one of those in which opposing tendencies coexist in almost equal strength: the passionate sensibility which, impatient of definite thought, floods every idea with emotion and tends towards contemplative ecstasy, alternated in him with a keen perception of outward facts and a vigorous practical judgment of men and things. And in this case of the Trial by Fire, the latter characteristics were stimulated into unusual activity by an acute physical sensitiveness which gives overpowering force to the conception of pain and destruction as a necessary sequence of facts which have already been causes of pain in our experience. The promptitude with which men will consent to touch red-hot iron with a wet finger is not to be measured by their theoretic acceptance of the im-

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possibility that the iron will burn them: practical belief depends on what is most strongly represented in the mind at a given moment. And with the Frate's constitution, when the Trial by Fire was urged on his imagination as an immediate demand, it was impossible for him to believe that he or any other man could walk through the flames unhurt—impossible for him to believe that even if he resolved to offer himself, he would not shrink at the last moment.

But the Florentines were not likely to make these fine distinctions. To the common run of mankind it has always seemed a proof of mental vigour to find moral questions easy, and judge conduct according to concise alternatives. And nothing was likely to seem plainer than that a man who at one time declared that God would not leave him without the guarantee of a miracle, and yet drew back when it was proposed to test his declaration, had said what he did not believe. Were not Fra Domenico and Fra Mariano, and scores of Piagnoni besides, ready to enter the fire? What was the cause of their superior courage, if it was not their superior faith? Savonarola could not have explained his conduct satisfactorily to his friends, even if he had been able to explain it thoroughly to himself. And he was not. Our naked feelings make haste to clothe themselves in propositions which lie at hand among our store of opinions, and to give a true account of what passes within us something else is necessary besides sincerity, even when sincerity is unmixed. In these very moments, when Savonarola was kneeling in

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audible prayer, he had ceased to hear the words on his lips. They were drowned by argumentative voices within him that shaped their reasons more and more for an outward audience.

"To appeal to heaven for a miracle by a rash acceptance of a challenge, which is a mere snare prepared for me by ignoble foes, would be a tempting of God, and the appeal would not be responded to. Let the Pope's legate come, let the ambassadors of all the great Powers come and promise that the calling of a General Council and the reform of the Church shall hang on the miracle, and I will enter the flames, trusting that God will not withold His seal from that great work. Until then I reserve myself for higher duties which are directly laid upon me: it is not permitted to me to leap from the chariot for the sake of wrestling with every loud vaunter. But Fra Domenico's invincible zeal to enter into the trial may be the sign of a Divine vocation, may be a pledge that the miracle——"

But no! when Savonarola brought his mind close to the threatened scene in the Piazza, and imagined a human body entering the fire, his belief recoiled again. It was not an event that his imagination could simply see: he felt it with shuddering vibrations to the extremities of his sensitive fingers. The miracle could not be. Nay, the trial itself was not to happen: he was warranted in doing all in his power to hinder it. The fuel might be got ready in the Piazza, the people might be assembled, the preparatory formalities might be gone through: all this was perhaps inevitable now, and he could no longer

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resist it without bringing dishonour on—himself? Yes, and therefore on the cause of God. But it was not really intended that the Franciscan should enter the fire, and while *he* hung back there would be the means of preventing Fra Domenico's entrance. At the very worst, if Fra Domenico were compelled to enter, he should carry the consecrated Host with him, and with that Mystery in his hand, there might be a warrant for expecting that the ordinary effects of fire would be stayed; or, more probably, this demand would be resisted, and might thus be a final obstacle to the trial.

But these intentions could not be avowed: he must appear frankly to await the trial, and to trust in its issue. That dissidence between inward reality and outward seeming was not the Christian simplicity after which he had striven through years of his youth and prime, and which he had preached as a chief fruit of the Divine life. In the stress and heat of the day, with cheeks burning, with shouts ringing in the ears, who is so blest as to remember the yearnings he had in the cool and silent morning and know that he has not belied them?

"O God, it is for the sake of the people—because they are blind—because their faith depends on me. If I put on sackcloth and cast myself among the ashes, who will take up the standard and head the battle? Have I not been led by a way which I knew not to the work that lies before me?"

The conflict was one that could not end, and in the effort at prayerful pleading the uneasy mind

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laved its smart continually in thoughts of the greatness of that task which there was no man else to fulfil if he forsook it. It was not a thing of every day that a man should be inspired with the vision and the daring that made a sacred rebel.

Even the words of prayer had died away. He continued to kneel, but his mind was filled with the images of results to be felt through all Europe; and the sense of immediate difficulties was being lost in the glow of that vision, when the knocking at the door announced the expected visit.

Savonarola drew on his mantle before he left his cell, as was his custom when he received visitors; and with that immediate response to any appeal from without which belongs to a power-loving nature accustomed to make its power felt by speech, he met Tito with a glance as self-possessed and strong as if he had risen from resolution instead of conflict.

Tito did not kneel, but simply made a greeting of profound deference, which Savonarola received quietly without any sacerdotal words, and then desiring him to be seated, said at once—

"Your business is something of weight, my son, that could not be conveyed through others?'

"Assuredly, father, else I should not have presumed to ask it. I will not trespass on your time by any proem. I gathered from a remark of Messer Domenico Mazzinghi that you might be glad to make use of the next special courier who is sent to France with despatches from the Ten. I must entreat you to pardon me if I have been too officious; but inasmuch as Messer Domenico is at this moment away

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at his villa, I wished to apprise you that a courier carrying important letters is about to depart for Lyons at daybreak to-morrow."

The muscles of Fra Girolamo's face were eminently under command, as must be the case with all men whose personality is powerful, and in deliberate speech he was habitually cautious, confiding his intentions to none without necessity. But under any strong mental stimulus, his eyes were liable to a dilatation and added brilliancy that no strength of will could control. He looked steadily at Tito, and did not answer immediately, as if he had to consider whether the information he had just heard met any purpose of his.

Tito, whose glance never seemed observant, but rarely let anything escape it, had expected precisely that dilatation and flash of Savonarola's eyes which he had noted on other occasions. He saw it, and then immediately busied himself in adjusting his gold fibula, which had got wrong; seeming to imply that he awaited an answer patiently.

The fact was that Savonarola had expected to receive this intimation from Domenico Mazzinghi, one of the Ten, an ardent disciple of his whom he had already employed to write a private letter to the Florentine ambassador in France, to prepare the way for a letter to the French king himself in Savonarola's handwriting, which now lay ready in the desk at his side. It was a letter calling on the king to assist in summoning a General Council, that might reform the abuses of the Church, and begin by deposing Pope Alexander, who was not right-

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fully Pope, being a vicious unbeliever, elected by corruption and governing by simony.

This fact was not what Tito knew, but what his constructive talent, guided by subtle indications, had led him to guess and hope.

"It is true, my son," said Savonarola, quietly,—"it is true I have letters which I would gladly send by safe conveyance under cover to our ambassador. Our community of San Marco, as you know, has affairs in France, being, amongst other things, responsible for a debt to that singularly wise and experienced Frenchman, Signor Philippe de Comines, on the library of the Medici, which we purchased; but I apprehend that Domenico Mazzinghi himself may return to the city before evening, and I should gain more time for preparation of the letters if I waited to deposit them in his hands."

"Assuredly, reverend father, that might be better on all grounds, except one, namely, that if anything occurred to hinder Messer Domenico's return, the despatch of the letters would require either that I should come to San Marco again at a late hour, or that you should send them to me by your secretary; and I am aware that you wish to guard against the false inferences which might be drawn from a too frequent communication between yourself and any officer of the government." In throwing out this difficulty Tito felt that the more unwillingness the Frate showed to trust him, the more certain he would be of his conjecture.

Savonarola was silent; but while he kept his mouth firm, a slight glow rose in his face with the

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suppressed excitement that was growing within him. It would be a critical moment—that in which he delivered the letter out of his own hands.

"It is most probable that Messer Domenico will return in time," said Tito, affecting to consider the Frate's determination settled, and rising from his chair as he spoke. "With your permission, I will take my leave, father, not to trespass on your time when my errand is done; but as I may not be favoured with another interview, I venture to confide to you—what is not yet known to others, except to the magnificent Ten—that I contemplate resigning my secretaryship, and leaving Florence shortly. Am I presuming too much on your interest in stating what relates chiefly to myself?"

"Speak on, my son," said the Frate; "I desire to know your prospects."

"I find, then, that I have mistaken my real vocation in forsaking the career of pure letters, for which I was brought up. The politics of Florence, father, are worthy to occupy the greatest mind—to occupy yours—when a man is in a position to execute his own ideas; but when, like me, he can only hope to be the mere instrument of changing schemes, he requires to be animated by the minor attachments of a born Florentine: also, my wife's unhappy alienation from a Florentine residence since the painful events of August naturally influences me. I wish to join her."

Savonarola inclined his head approvingly.

"I intend, then, soon to leave Florence, to visit the chief courts of Europe, and to widen my acquaint-

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ance with the men of letters in the various universities. I shall go first to the court of Hungary, where scholars are eminently welcome; and I shall probably start in a week or ten days. I have not concealed from you, father, that I am no religious enthusiast; I have not my wife's ardour; but religious enthusiasm, as I conceive, is not necessary in order to appreciate the grandeur and justice of your views concerning the government of nations and the Church. And if you condescend to intrust me with any commission that will further the relations you wish to establish, I shall feel honoured. May I now take my leave?"

"Stay, my son. When you depart from Florence I will send a letter to your wife, of whose spiritual welfare I would fain be assured, for she left me in anger. As for the letters to France, such as I have ready——"

Savonarola rose and turned to his desk as he spoke. He took from it a letter on which Tito could see, but not read, an address in the Frate's own minute and exquisite handwriting, still to be seen covering the margins of his Bibles. He took a large sheet of paper, enclosed the letter, and sealed it.

"Pardon me, father," said Tito, before Savonarola had time to speak, "unless it were your decided wish, I would rather not incur the responsibility of carrying away the letter. Messer Domenico Mazzinghi will doubtless return, or, if not, Fra Niccolò can convey it to me at the second hour of the evening, when I shall place the other despatches in the courier's hands."

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"At present, my son," said the Frate, waiving that point, "I wish you to address this packet to our ambassador in your own handwriting, which is preferable to my secretary's."

Tito sat down to write the address while the Frate stood by him with folded arms, the glow mounting in his cheek, and his lip at last quivering. Tito rose and was about to move away, when Savonarola said abruptly—"Take it, my son. There is no use in waiting. It does not please me that Fra Niccolò should have needless errands to the Palazzo."

As Tito took the letter, Savonarola stood in suppressed excitement that forbade further speech. There seems to be a subtle emanation from passionate natures like his, making their mental states tell immediately on others; when they are absent-minded and inwardly excited there is silence in the air.

Tito made a deep reverence and went out with the letter under his mantle.

The letter was duly delivered to the courier and carried out of Florence. But before that happened another messenger, privately employed by Tito, had conveyed information in cipher, which was carried by a series of relays to armed agents of Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, on the watch for the very purpose of intercepting despatches on the borders of the Milanese territory.

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CHAPTER LXV.

THE TRIAL BY FIRE.

Little more than a week after, on the seventh of April, the great Piazza della Signoria presented a stranger spectacle even than the famous Bonfire of Vanities. And a greater multitude had assembled to see it than had ever before tried to find place for themselves in the wide Piazza, even on the day of San Giovanni.

It was near mid-day, and since the early morning there had been a gradual swarming of the people at every coign of vantage or disadvantage offered by the façades and roofs of the houses, and such spaces of the pavement as were free to the public. Men were seated on iron rods that made a sharp angle with the rising wall, were clutching slim pillars with arms and legs, were astride on the necks of the rough statuary that here and there surmounted the entrances of the grander houses, were finding a palm's-breadth of seat on a bit of architrave, and a footing on the rough projections of the rustic stonework, while they

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clutched the strong iron rings or staples driven into the walls beside them.

For they were come to see a Miracle: cramped limbs and abraded flesh seemed slight inconveniences with that prospect close at hand. It is the ordinary lot of mankind to hear of miracles, and more or less to believe in them; but now the Florentines were going to see one. At the very least they would see half a miracle; for if the monk did not come whole out of the fire, they would see him enter it, and infer that he was burned in the middle.

There could be no reasonable doubt, it seemed, that the fire would be kindled, and that the monks would enter it. For there, before their eyes, was the long platform, eight feet broad, and twenty yards long, with a grove of fuel heaped up terribly, great branches of dry oak as a foundation, crackling thorns above, and well-anointed tow and rags, known to make fine flames in Florentine illuminations. The platform began at the corner of the marble terrace in front of the Old Palace, close to Marzocco, the stone lion, whose aged visage looked frowningly along the grove of fuel that stretched obliquely across the Piazza.

Besides that, there were three large bodies of armed men: five hundred hired soldiers of the Signoria stationed before the palace; five hundred Compagnacci under Dolfo Spini, far off on the opposite side of the Piazza; and three hundred armed citizens of another sort, under Marco Salviati, Savonarola's friend, in front of Orgagna's Loggia, where the Franciscans and Dominicans were to be placed with their champions.

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Here had been much expense of money and labour, and high dignities were concerned. There could be no reasonable doubt that something great was about to happen; and it would certainly be a great thing if the two monks were simply burned, for in that case too God would have spoken, and said very plainly that Fra Girolamo was not His prophet.

And there was not much longer to wait, for it was now near mid-day. Half the monks were already at their post, and that half of the Loggia that lies towards the Palace was already filled with grey mantles; but the other half, divided off by boards, was still empty of everything except a small altar. The Franciscans had entered and taken their places in silence. But now, at the other side of the Piazza was heard loud chanting from two hundred voices, and there was general satisfaction, if not in the chanting, at least in the evidence that the Dominicans were come. That loud chanting repetition of the prayer, "Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered," was unpleasantly suggestive to some impartial ears of a desire to vaunt confidence and excite dismay; and so was the flame-coloured velvet cope in which Fra Domenico was arrayed as he headed the procession, cross in hand, his simple mind really exalted with faith, and with the genuine intention to enter the flames for the glory of God and Fra Girolamo. Behind him came Savonarola in the white vestment of a priest, carrying in his hands a vessel containing the consecrated Host. He, too, was chanting loudly; he, too, looked firm and confident, and as all eyes were turned eagerly on him, either in

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anxiety, curiosity, or malignity, from the moment when he entered the Piazza till he mounted the steps of the Loggia and deposited the Sacrament on the altar, there was an intensifying flash and energy in his countenance responding to that scrutiny.

We are so made, almost all of us, that the false seeming which we have thought of with painful shrinking when beforehand in our solitude it has urged itself on us as a necessity, will possess our muscles and move our lips as if nothing but that were easy when once we have come under the stimulus of expectant eyes and ears. And the strength of that stimulus to Savonarola can hardly be measured by the experience of ordinary lives. Perhaps no man has ever had a mighty influence over his fellows without having the innate need to dominate, and this need usually becomes the more imperious in proportion as the complications of life make Self inseparable from a purpose which is not selfish. In this way it came to pass that on the day of the Trial by Fire, the doubleness which is the pressing temptation in every public career, whether of priest, orator, or statesman, was more strongly defined in Savonarola's consciousness as the acting of a part, than at any other period in his life. He was struggling not against impending martyrdom, but against impending ruin.

Therefore he looked and acted as if he were thoroughly confident, when all the while foreboding was pressing with leaden weight on his heart, not only because of the probable issues of this trial, but because of another event already past — an event

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which was spreading a sunny satisfaction through the mind of a man who was looking down at the passion-worn prophet from a window of the Old Palace. It was a common turning-point towards which those widely-sundered lives had been converging, that two evenings ago the news had come that the Florentine courier of the Ten had been arrested and robbed of all his despatches, so that Savonarola's letter was already in the hands of the Duke of Milan, and would soon be in the hands of the Pope, not only heightening rage, but giving a new justification to extreme measures. There was no malignity in Tito Melema's satisfaction: it was the mild self-gratulation of a man who has won a game that has employed hypothetic skill, not a game that has stirred the muscles and heated the blood. Of course that bundle of desires and contrivances called human nature, when moulded into the form of a plain-featured Frate Predicatore, more or less of an impostor, could not be a pathetic object to a brilliant-minded scholar who understood everything. Yet this tonsured Girolamo with the high nose and large under lip was an immensely clever Frate, mixing with his absurd superstitions or fabrications very remarkable notions about government: no babbler, but a man who could keep his secrets. Tito had no more spite against him than against Saint Dominic. On the contrary, Fra Girolamo's existence had been highly convenient to Tito Melema, furnishing him with that round of the ladder from which he was about to leap on to a new and smooth footing very much to his heart's content. And everything now was in forward preparation for

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that leap: let one more sun rise and set, and Tito hoped to quit Florence. He had been so industrious that he felt at full leisure to amuse himself with to-day's comedy, which the thick-headed Dolfo Spini could never have brought about but for him.

Not yet did the loud chanting cease, but rather swelled to a deafening roar, being taken up in all parts of the Piazza by the Piagnoni, who carried their little red crosses as a badge, and, most of them, chanted the prayer for the confusion of God's enemies with the expectation of an answer to be given through the medium of a more signal personage than Fra Domenico. This good Frate in his flame-coloured cope was now kneeling before the little altar on which the Sacrament was deposited, awaiting his summons.

On the Franciscan side of the Loggia there was no chanting and no flame-colour: only silence and greyness. But there was this counterbalancing difference, that the Franciscans had two champions: a certain Fra Giuliano was to pair with Fra Domenico, while the original champion, Fra Francesco, confined his challenge to Savonarola.

"Surely," thought the men perched uneasily on the rods and pillars, "all must be ready now. This chanting might stop, and we should see better when the Frati are moving towards the platform."

But the Frati were not to be seen moving yet. Pale Franciscan faces were looking uneasily over the boarding at that flame-coloured cope. It had an evil look and might be enchanted, so that a false miracle would be wrought by magic. Your monk

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may come whole out of the fire, and yet it may be the work of the devil.

And now there was passing to and fro between the Loggia and the marble terrace of the Palazzo, and the roar of chanting became a little quieter, for every one at a distance was beginning to watch more eagerly. But it soon appeared that the new movement was not a beginning, but an obstacle to beginning. The dignified Florentines appointed to preside over this affair as moderators on each side, went in and out of the Palace, and there was much debate with the Franciscans. But at last it was clear that Fra Domenico, conspicuous in his flame-colour, was being fetched towards the Palace. Probably the fire had already been kindled — it was difficult to see at a distance — and the miracle was going to begin.

Not at all. The flame-coloured cope disappeared within the Palace; then another Dominican was fetched away; and for a long while everything went on as before—the tiresome chanting, which was not miraculous, and Fra Girolamo in his white vestment standing just in the same place. But at last something happened: Fra Domenico was seen coming out of the Palace again, and returning to his brethren. He had changed all his clothes with a brother monk, but he was guarded on each flank by a Franciscan, lest coming into the vicinity of Savonarola he should be enchanted again.

"Ah, then," thought the distant spectators, a little less conscious of cramped limbs and hunger, "Fra Domenico is not going to enter the fire. It is Fra

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Girolamo who offers himself after all. We shall see him move presently, and if he comes out of the flames we shall have a fine view of him!"

But Fra Girolamo did not move, except with the ordinary action accompanying speech. The speech was bold and firm, perhaps somewhat ironically remonstrant, like that of Elijah to the priests of Baal, demanding the cessation of these trivial delays. But speech is the most irritating kind of argument for those who are out of hearing, cramped in the limbs, and empty in the stomach. And what need was there for speech? If the miracle did not begin, it could be no one's fault but Fra Girolamo's, who might put an end to all difficulties by offering himself now the fire was ready, as he had been forward enough to do when there was no fuel in sight.

More movement to and fro, more discussion; and the afternoon seemed to be slipping away all the faster because the clouds had gathered, and changed the light on everything, and sent a chill through the spectators, hungry in mind and body.

Now it was the crucifix which Fra Domenico wanted to carry into the fire and must not be allowed to profane in that manner. After some little resistance Savonarola gave way to this objection, and thus had the advantage of making one more concession; but he immediately placed in Fra Domenico's hands the vessel containing the consecrated Host. The idea that the presence of the sacred Mystery might in the worst extremity avert the ordinary effects of fire hovered in his mind as a possibility; but the issue on which he counted was

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of a more positive kind. In taking up the Host he said quietly, as if he were only doing what had been presupposed from the first—

"Since they are not willing that you should enter with the crucifix, my brother, enter simply with the Sacrament."

New horror in the Franciscans; new firmness in Savonarola. "It was impious presumption to carry the Sacrament into the fire: if it were burned the scandal would be great in the minds of the weak and ignorant." "Not at all: even if it were burned, the Accidents only would be consumed, the Substance would remain." Here was a question that might be argued till set of sun and remain as elastic as ever; and no one could propose settling it by proceeding to the trial, since it was essentially a preliminary question. It was only necessary that both sides should remain firm — that the Franciscans should persist in not permitting the Host to be carried into the fire, and that Fra Domenico should persist in refusing to enter without it.

Meanwhile the clouds were getting darker, the air chiller. Even the chanting was missed now it had given way to inaudible argument; and the confused sounds of talk from all points of the Piazza, showing that expectation was everywhere relaxing, contributed to the irritating presentiment that nothing decisive would be done. Here and there a dropping shout was heard; then, more frequent shouts in a rising scale of scorn.

"Light the fire and drive them in!" "Let us have a smell of roast — we want our dinner!"

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"Come Prophet, let us know whether anything is to happen before the twenty-four hours are over!" "Yes, yes, what's your last vision?" "Oh, he's got a dozen in his inside; they're the small change for a miracle!" "Olà, Frate, where are you? Never mind wasting the fuel!"

Still the same movement to and fro between the Loggia and the Palace; still the same debate, slow and unintelligible to the multitude as the colloquies of insects that touch antennæ to no other apparent effect than that of going and coming. But an interpretation was not long wanting to unheard debates in which Fra Girolamo was constantly a speaker: it was he who was hindering the trial; everybody was appealing to him now, and he was hanging back.

Soon the shouts ceased to be distinguishable, and were lost in an uproar not simply of voices, but of clashing metal and trampling feet. The suggestions of the irritated people had stimulated old impulses in Dolfo Spini and his band of Compagnacci; it seemed an opportunity not to be lost for putting an end to Florentine difficulties by getting possession of the arch-hypocrite's person; and there was a vigorous rush of the armed men towards the Loggia, thrusting the people aside, or driving them on to the file of soldiery stationed in front of the Palace. At this movement, everything was suspended both with monks and embarrassed magistrates except the palpitating watch to see what would come of the struggle.

But the Loggia was well guarded by the band under the brave Salviati; the soldiers of the Sig-

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noria assisted in the repulse; and the trampling and rushing were all backward again towards the Tetto de' Pisani, when the blackness of the heavens seemed to intensify in this moment of utter confusion; and the rain, which had already been felt in scattered drops, began to fall with rapidly growing violence, wetting the fuel, and running in streams off the platform, wetting the weary hungry people to the skin, and driving every man's disgust and rage inwards to ferment there in the damp darkness.

Everybody knew now that the Trial by Fire was not to happen. The Signoria was doubtless glad of the rain, as an obvious reason, better than any pretext, for declaring that both parties might go home. It was the issue which Savonarola had expected and desired; yet it would be an ill description of what he felt to say that he was glad. As that rain fell, and plashed on the edge of the Loggia, and sent spray over the altar and all garments and faces, the Frate knew that the demand for him to enter the fire was at an end. But he knew too, with a certainty as irresistible as the damp chill that had taken possession of his frame, that the design of his enemies was fulfilled, and that his honour was not saved. He knew that he should have to make his way to San Marco again through the enraged crowd, and that the hearts of many friends who would once have defended him with their lives would now be turned against him.

When the rain had ceased he asked for a guard from the Signoria, and it was given him. Had he said that he was willing to die for the work of his

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life? Yes, and he had not spoken falsely. But to die in dishonour—held up to scorn as a hypocrite and a false prophet? "O God! *that* is not martyrdom! It is the blotting out of a life that has been a protest against wrong. Let me die because of the worth that is in me, not because of my weakness."

The rain had ceased, and the light from the breaking clouds fell on Savonarola as he left the Loggia in the midst of his guard, walking as he had come, with the Sacrament in his hand. But there seemed no glory in the light that fell on him now, no smile of heaven: it was only that light which shines on, patiently and impartially, justifying or condemning by simply showing all things in the slow history of their ripening. He heard no blessing, no tones of pity, but only taunts and threats. He knew this was a foretaste of coming bitterness; yet his courage mounted under all moral attack, and he showed no sign of dismay.

"Well parried, Frate!" said Tito, as Savonarola descended the steps of the Loggia. "But I fear your career at Florence is ended. What say you, my Niccolò?"

"It is a pity his falsehoods were not all of a wise sort," said Macchiavelli, with a melancholy shrug. "With the times so much on his side as they are about Church affairs, he might have done something great."

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CHAPTER LXVI.

A MASQUE OF THE FURIES.

THE next day was Palm Sunday, or Olive Sunday, as it was chiefly called in the olive-growing Valdarno; and the morning sun shone with a more delicious clearness for the yesterday's rain. Once more Savonarola mounted the pulpit in San Marco, and saw a flock around him whose faith in him was still unshaken; and this morning in calm and sad sincerity he declared himself ready to die: in front of all visions he saw his own doom. Once more he uttered the benediction, and saw the faces of men and women lifted towards him in venerating love. Then he descended the steps of the pulpit and turned away from that sight for ever.

For before the sun had set Florence was in an uproar. The passions which had been roused the day before had been smouldering through that quiet morning, and had now burst out again with a fury not unassisted by design, and not without official connivance. The uproar had begun at the Duomo in an attempt of some Compagnacci to hinder the

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evening sermon, which the Piagnoni had assembled to hear. But no sooner had men's blood mounted and the disturbances had become an affray than the cry arose, "To San Marco! the fire to San Marco!"

And long before the daylight had died, both the church and convent were being besieged by an enraged and continually increasing multitude. Not without resistance. For the monks, long conscious of growing hostility without, had arms within their walls, and some of them fought as vigorously in their long white tunics as if they had been Knights Templars. Even the command of Savonarola could not prevail against the impulse to self-defence in arms that were still muscular under the Dominican serge. There were laymen too who had not chosen to depart, and some of them fought fiercely: there was firing from the high altar close by the great crucifix, there was pouring of stones and hot embers from the convent roof, there was close fighting with swords in the cloisters. Notwithstanding the force of the assailants, the attack lasted till deep night.

The demonstrations of the Government had all been against the convent; early in the attack guards had been sent for, not to disperse the assailants, but to command all within the convent to lay down their arms, all laymen to depart from it, and Savonarola himself to quit the Florentine territory within twelve hours. Had Savonarola quitted the convent then, he could hardly have escaped being torn to pieces; he was willing to go, but his friends hindered him. It was felt to be a great risk even for some laymen of high name to depart

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by the garden wall, but among those who had chosen to do so was Francesco Valori, who hoped to raise rescue from without.

And now when it was deep night—when the struggle could hardly have lasted much longer, and the Compagnacci might soon have carried their swords into the library, where Savonarola was praying with the Brethren who had either not taken up arms or had laid them down at his command—there came a second body of guards, commissioned by the Signoria to demand the persons of Fra Girolamo and his two coadjutors, Fra Domenico and Fra Salvestro.

Loud was the roar of triumphant hate when the light of lanterns showed the Frate issuing from the door of the convent with a guard who promised him no other safety than that of the prison. The struggle now was, who should get first in the stream that rushed up the narrow street to see the Prophet carried back in ignominy to the Piazza where he had braved it yesterday—who should be in the best place for reaching his ear with insult, nay, if possible, for smiting him and kicking him. This was not difficult for some of the armed Compagnacci who were not prevented from mixing themselves with the guards.

When Savonarola felt himself dragged and pushed along in the midst of that hooting multitude; when lanterns were lifted to show him deriding faces; when he felt himself spit upon, smitten and kicked with grossest words of insult, it seemed to him that the worst bitterness of life was past. If men judged

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him guilty, and were bent on having his blood, it was only death that awaited him. But the worst drop of bitterness can never be wrung on to our lips from without: the lowest depth of resignation is not to be found in martyrdom; it is only to be found when we have covered our heads in silence and felt, "I am not worthy to be a martyr; the Truth shall prosper, but not by me."

But that brief imperfect triumph of insulting the Frate, who had soon disappeared under the doorway of the Old Palace, was only like the taste of blood to the tiger. Were there not the houses of the hypocrite's friends to be sacked? Already one-half of the armed multitude, too much in the rear to share greatly in the siege of the convent, had been employed in the more profitable work of attacking rich houses, not with planless desire for plunder, but with that discriminating selection of such as belonged to chief Piagnoni, which showed that the riot was under guidance, and that the rabble with clubs and staves was well officered by sword-girt Compagnacci. Was there not — next criminal after the Frate — the ambitious Francesco Valori, suspected of wanting with the Frate's help to make himself a Doge or Gonfaloniere for life? And the grey-haired man who, eight months ago, had lifted his arm and his voice in such ferocious demand for justice on five of his fellow-citizens, only escaped from San Marco to experience what *others* called justice—to see his house surrounded by an angry, greedy multitude, to see his wife shot dead with an arrow, and to be himself murdered, as he was on his way to answer a sum-

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mons to the Palazzo, by the swords of men named Ridolfi and Tornabuoni.

In this way that Masque of the Furies, called Riot, was played on in Florence through the hours of night and early morning.

But the chief director was not visible: he had his reasons for issuing his orders from a private retreat, being of rather too high a name to let his red feather be seen waving amongst all the work that was to be done before the dawn. The retreat was the same house and the same room in a quiet street between Santa Croce and San Marco, where we have seen Tito paying a secret visit to Dolfo Spini. Here the Captain of the Compagnacci sat through this memorable night, receiving visitors who came and went, and went and came, some of them in the guise of armed Compagnacci, others dressed obscurely and without visible arms. There was abundant wine on the table, with drinking-cups for chance comers; and though Spini was on his guard against excessive drinking, he took enough from time to time to heighten the excitement produced by the news that was being brought to him continually.

Among the obscurely-dressed visitors Ser Ceccone was one of the most frequent, and as the hours advanced towards the morning twilight he had remained as Spini's constant companion, together with Francesco Cei, who was then in rather careless hiding in Florence, expecting to have his banishment revoked when the Frate's fall had been accomplished.

The tapers had burnt themselves into low shapeless masses, and holes in the shutters were just

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marked by a sombre outward light, when Spini, who had started from his seat and walked up and down with an angry flush on his face at some talk that had been going forward with those two unmilitary companions, burst out—

"The devil spit him! he shall pay for it, though. Ha, ha! the claws shall be down on him when he little thinks of them. So *he* was to be the great man after all! He's been pretending to chuck everything towards my cap, as if I were a blind beggarman, and all the while he's been winking and filling his own scarsella. I should like to hang skins about him and set my hounds on him! And he's got that fine ruby of mine, I was fool enough to give him yesterday. Malediction! And he was laughing at me in his sleeve two years ago, and spoiling the best plan that ever was laid. I was a fool for trusting myself with a rascal who had long-twisted contrivances that nobody could see to the end of but himself."

"A Greek, too, who dropped into Florence with gems packed about him," said Francesco Cei, who had a slight smile of amusement on his face at Spini's fuming. "You did *not* choose your confidant very wisely, my Dolfo."

"He's a cursed deal cleverer than you, Francesco, and handsomer too," said Spini, turning on his associate with a general desire to worry anything that presented itself.

"I humbly conceive," said Ser Ceccone, "that Messer Francesco's poetic genius will outweigh ——"

"Yes, yes, rub your hands! I hate that notary's

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trick of yours," interrupted Spini, whose patronage consisted largely in this sort of frankness. "But there comes Taddeo, or somebody: now's the time! What news, eh?" he went on, as two Compagnacci entered with heated looks.

"Bad!" said one. "The people have made up their minds they were going to have the sacking of Soderini's house, and now they have been balked we shall have them turning on us, if we don't take care. I suspect there are some Mediceans buzzing about among them, and we may see them attacking your palace over the bridge before long, unless we can find a bait for them another way."

"I have it!" said Spini, and seizing Taddeo by the belt he drew him aside to give him directions, while the other went on telling Cei how the Signoria had interfered about Soderini's house.

"Ecco!" exclaimed Spini, presently, giving Taddeo a slight push towards the door. "Go, and make quick work."

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CHAPTER LXVII.

WAITING BY THE RIVER.

About the time when the two Compagnacci went on their errand, there was another man who, on the opposite side of the Arno, was also going out into the chill grey twilight. His errand, apparently, could have no relation to theirs; he was making his way to the brink of the river at a spot which, though within the city walls, was overlooked by no dwellings, and which only seemed the more shrouded and lonely for the warehouses and granaries which at some little distance backward turned their shoulders to the river. There was a sloping width of long grass and rushes made all the more dank by broad gutters which here and there emptied themselves into the Arno.

The gutters and the loneliness were the attraction that drew this man to come and sit down among the grass, and bend over the waters that ran swiftly in the channelled slope at his side. For he had once had a large piece of bread brought to him by one of those friendly runlets, and more than once a raw

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carrot and apple-parings. It was worth while to wait for such chances in a place where there was no one to see, and often in his restless wakefulness he came to watch here before daybreak; it might save him for one day the need of that silent begging which consisted in sitting on a church-step by the wayside out beyond the Porta San Frediano.

For Baldassarre hated begging so much that he would perhaps have chosen to die rather than make even that silent appeal, but for one reason that made him desire to live. It was no longer a hope; it was only that possibility which clings to every idea that has taken complete possession of the mind: the sort of possibility that makes a woman watch on a headland for the ship which held something dear, though all her neighbours are certain that the ship was a wreck long years ago. After he had come out of the convent hospital, where the monks of San Miniato had taken care of him as long as he was helpless; after he had watched in vain for the Wife who was to help him, and had begun to think that she was dead of the pestilence that seemed to fill all the space since the night he parted from her, he had been unable to conceive any way in which sacred vengeance could satisfy itself through his arm. His knife was gone, and he was too feeble in body to win another by work, too feeble in mind, even if he had had the knife, to contrive that it should serve its one purpose. He was a shattered, bewildered, lonely old man; yet he desired to live: he waited for something of which he had no distinct vision—something dim, formless—that startled him,

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and made strong pulsations within him, like that unknown thing which we look for when we start from sleep, though no voice or touch has waked us. Baldassarre desired to live; and therefore he crept out in the grey light, and seated himself in the long grass, and watched the waters that had a faint promise in them.

Meanwhile the Compagnacci were busy at their work. The formidable bands of armed men, left to do their will with very little interference from an embarrassed if not conniving Signoria, had parted into two masses, but both were soon making their way by different roads towards the Arno. The smaller mass was making for the Ponte Rubaconte, the larger for the Ponte Vecchio; but in both the same words had passed from mouth to mouth as a signal, and almost every man of the multitude knew that he was going to the Via de' Bardi to sack a house there. If he knew no other reason, could he demand a better?

The armed Compagnacci knew something more, for a brief word of command flies quickly, and the leaders of the two streams of rabble had a perfect understanding that they would meet before a certain house a little towards the eastern end of the Via de' Bardi, where the master would probably be in bed, and be surprised in his morning sleep.

But the master of that house was neither sleeping nor in bed; he had not been in bed that night. For Tito's anxiety to quit Florence had been stimulated by the events of the previous day: investigations would follow in which appeals might be made to

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him delaying his departure: and in all delay he had an uneasy sense that there was danger. Falsehood had prospered and waxed strong; but it had nourished the twin life, Fear. He no longer wore his armour, he was no longer afraid of Baldassarre; but from the corpse of that dead fear a spirit had risen—the undying *habit* of fear. He felt he should not be safe till he was out of this fierce, turbid Florence; and now he was ready to go. Maso was to deliver up his house to the new tenant; his horses and mules were awaiting him in San Gallo; Tessa and the children had been lodged for the night in the Borgo outside the gate, and would be dressed in readiness to mount the mules and join him. He descended the stone steps into the courtyard, he passed through the great doorway, not the same Tito, but nearly as brilliant as on the day when he had first entered that house and made the mistake of falling in love with Romola. The mistake was remedied now: the old life was cast off, and was soon to be far behind him.

He turned with rapid steps towards the Piazza dei Mozzi, intending to pass over the Ponte Rubaconte; but as he went along certain sounds came upon his ears that made him turn round and walk yet more quickly in the opposite direction. Was the mob coming into Oltrarno? It was a vexation, for he would have preferred the more private road. He must now go by the Ponte Vecchio; and unpleasant sensations made him draw his mantle close round him, and walk at his utmost speed. There was no one to see him in that grey twilight. But before

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he reached the end of the Via de' Bardi, like sounds fell on his ear again, and this time they were much louder and nearer. Could he have been deceived before? The mob must be coming over the Ponte Vecchio. Again he turned, from an impulse of fear that was stronger than reflection; but it was only to be assured that the mob was actually entering the street from the opposite end. He chose not to go back to his house: after all they would not attack *him*. Still, he had some valuables about him; and all things except reason and order are possible with a mob. But necessity does the work of courage. He went on towards the Ponte Vecchio, the rush and the trampling and the confused voices getting so loud before him that he had ceased to hear them behind.

For he had reached the end of the street, and the crowd pouring from the bridge met him at the turning and hemmed in his way. He had not time to wonder at a sudden shout before he felt himself surrounded, not, in the first instance, by an unarmed rabble, but by armed Compagnacci; the next sensation was that his cap fell off, and that he was thrust violently forward amongst the rabble, along the narrow passage of the bridge. Then he distinguished the shouts, "Piagnone! Medicean! Piagnone! Throw him over the bridge!"

His mantle was being torn off him with strong pulls that would have throttled him if the fibula had not given way. Then his scarsella was snatched at; but all the while he was being hustled and dragged; and the snatch failed—his scarsella still hung at his

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side. Shouting, yelling, half motiveless execration rang stunningly in his ears, spreading even amongst those who had not yet seen him, and only knew there was a man to be reviled. Tito's horrible dread was that he should be struck down or trampled on before he reached the open arches that surmount the centre of the bridge. There was one hope for him, that they might throw him over before they had wounded him or beaten the strength out of him; and his whole soul was absorbed in that one hope and its obverse terror.

Yes—they *were* at the arches. In that moment Tito, with bloodless face and eyes dilated, had one of the self-preserving inspirations that come in extremity. With a sudden desperate effort he mastered the clasp of his belt, and flung belt and scarsella forward towards a yard of clear space against the parapet, crying in a ringing voice—

"There are diamonds! there is gold!"

In the instant the hold on him was relaxed, and there was a rush towards the scarsella. He threw himself on the parapet with a desperate leap, and the next moment plunged—plunged with a great plash into the dark river far below.

It was his chance of salvation; and it was a good chance. His life had been saved once before by his fine swimming, and as he rose to the surface again after his long dive he had a sense of deliverance. He struck out with all the energy of his strong prime, and the current helped him. If he could only swim beyond the Ponte alla Carrara he might land in a remote part of the city, and even yet reach

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San Gallo. Life was still before him. And the idiot mob, shouting and bellowing on the bridge there, would think he was drowned.

They did think so. Peering over the parapet along the dark stream, they could not see afar off the moving blackness of the floating hair, and the velvet tunic-sleeves.

It was only from the other way that a pale olive face could be seen looking white above the dark water: a face not easy even for the indifferent to forget, with its square forehead, the long low arch of the eyebrows, and the long lustrous agate-like eyes. Onward the face went on the dark current, with inflated quivering nostrils, with the blue veins distended on the temples. One bridge was passed—the bridge of Santa Trinità. Should he risk landing now rather than trust to his strength? No. He heard, or fancied he heard, yells and cries pursuing him. Terror pressed him most from the side of his fellow-men: he was less afraid of indefinite chances, and he swam on, panting and straining. He was not so fresh as he would have been if he had passed the night in sleep.

Yet the next bridge—the last bridge—was passed. He was conscious of it; but in the tumult of his blood, he could only feel vaguely that he was safe and might land. But where? The current was having its way with him: he hardly knew where he was: exhaustion was bringing on the dreamy state that precedes unconsciousness.

But now there were eyes that discerned him—aged eyes, strong for the distance. Baldassarre,

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looking up blankly from the search in the runlet that brought him nothing, had seen a white object coming along the broader stream. Could that be any fortunate chance for *him?* He looked and looked till the object gathered form: then he leaned forward with a start as he sat among the rank green stems, and his eyes seemed to be filled with a new light. Yet he only watched — motionless. Something was being brought to him.

The next instant a man's body was cast violently on the grass two yards from him, and he started forward like a panther, clutching the velvet tunic as he fell forward on the body and flashed a look in the man's face.

Dead—was he dead? The eyes were rigid. But no, it could not be—Justice had brought him. Men looked dead sometimes, and yet the life came back into them. Baldassarre did not feel feeble in that moment. He knew just what he could do. He got his large fingers within the neck of the tunic and held them there, kneeling on one knee beside the body and watching the face. There was a fierce hope in his heart, but it was mixed with trembling. In his eyes there was only fierceness: all the slow-burning remnant of life within him seemed to have leaped into flame.

Rigid — rigid still. Those eyes with the half-fallen lids were locked against vengeance. *Could* it be that he was dead? There was nothing to measure the time: it seemed long enough for hope to freeze into despair.

Surely at last the eyelids were quivering: the

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eyes were no longer rigid. There was a vibrating light in them: they opened wide.

"Ah, yes! You see me—you know me!"

Tito knew him; but he did not know whether it was life or death that had brought him into the presence of his injured father. It might be death—and death might mean this chill gloom with the face of the hideous past hanging over him for ever.

But now Baldassarre's only dread was, lest the young limbs should escape him. He pressed his knuckles against the round throat, and knelt upon the chest with all the force of his aged frame. Let death come now!

Again he kept his watch on the face. And when the eyes were rigid again, he dared not trust them. He would never lose his hold till some one came and found them. Justice would send some witness, and then he, Baldassarre, would declare that he had killed this traitor, to whom he had once been a father. They would perhaps believe him now, and then he would be content with the struggle of justice on earth—then he would desire to die with his hold on this body, and follow the traitor to hell that he might clutch him there.

And so he knelt, and so he pressed his knuckles against the round throat, without trusting to the seeming death, till the light got strong and he could kneel no longer. Then he sat on the body, still clutching the neck of the tunic. But the hours went on, and no witness came. No eyes descried

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afar off the two human bodies among the tall grass by the riverside. Florence was busy with greater affairs, and the preparation of a deeper tragedy.

Not long after those two bodies were lying in the grass, Savonarola was being tortured, and crying out in his agony, "I will confess!"

It was not until the sun was westward that a waggon drawn by a mild grey ox came to the edge of the grassy margin, and as the man who led it was leaning to gather up the round stones that lay heaped in readiness to be carried away, he detected some startling object in the grass. The aged man had fallen forward, and his dead clutch was on the garment of the other. It was not possible to separate them: nay, it was better to put them into the waggon and carry them as they were into the great Piazza, that notice might be given to the Eight.

As the waggon entered the frequented streets there was a growing crowd escorting it with its strange burden. No one knew the bodies for a long while, for the aged face had fallen forward, half hiding the younger. But before they had been moved out of sight, they had been recognised.

"I know that old man," Piero di Cosimo had testified. "I painted his likeness once. He is the prisoner who clutched Melema on the steps of the Duomo."

"He is perhaps the same old man who appeared at supper in my gardens," said Bernardo Rucellai, one of the Eight. "I had forgotten him. I thought

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he had died in prison. But there is no knowing the truth now."

Who shall put his finger on the work of justice, and say, "It is there"? Justice is like the Kingdom of God—it is not without us as a fact, it is within us as a great yearning.

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CHAPTER LXVIII.

ROMOLA'S WAKING.

Romola in her boat passed from dreaming into long deep sleep, and then again from deep sleep into busy dreaming, till at last she felt herself stretching out her arms in the court of the Bargello, where the flickering flames of the tapers seemed to get stronger and stronger till the dark scene was blotted out with light. Her eyes opened and she saw it was the light of morning. Her boat was lying still in a little creek; on her right hand lay the speckless sapphire-blue of the Mediterranean; on her left one of those scenes which were and still are repeated again and again like a sweet rhythm, on the shores of that loveliest sea.

In a deep curve of the mountains lay a breadth of green land, curtained by gentle tree-shadowed slopes leaning towards the rocky heights. Up these slopes might be seen here and there, gleaming between the tree-tops, a pathway leading to a little irregular mass of building that seemed to have clambered in a hasty way up the mountain-side, and taken a difficult stand

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there for the sake of showing the tall belfry as a sight of beauty to the scattered and clustered houses of the village below. The rays of the newly-risen sun fell obliquely on the westward horn of this crescent-shaped nook: all else lay in dewy shadow. No sound came across the stillness; the very waters seemed to have curved themselves there for rest.

The delicious sun-rays fell on Romola and thrilled her gently like a caress. She lay motionless, hardly watching the scene; rather, feeling simply the presence of peace and beauty. While we are still in our youth there can always come, in our early waking, moments when mere passive existence is itself a Lethe, when the exquisiteness of subtle indefinite sensation creates a bliss which is without memory and without desire. As the soft warmth penetrated Romola's young limbs, as her eyes rested on this sequestered luxuriance, it seemed that the agitating past had glided away like that dark scene in the Bargello, and that the afternoon dreams of her girlhood had really come back to her. For a minute or two the oblivion was untroubled; she did not even think that she could rest here for ever, she only felt that she rested. Then she became distinctly conscious that she was lying in the boat which had been bearing her over the waters all through the night. Instead of bringing her to death, it had been the gently lulling cradle of a new life. And in spite of her evening despair she was glad that the morning had come to her again: glad to think that she was resting in the familiar sunlight rather than in the unknown regions of death. *Could* she

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not rest here? No sound from Florence would reach her. Already oblivion was troubled; from behind the golden haze were piercing domes and towers and walls, parted by a river and enclosed by the green hills.

She rose from her reclining posture and sat up in the boat, willing, if she could, to resist the rush of thoughts that urged themselves along with the conjecture how far the boat had carried her. Why need she mind? This was a sheltered nook where there were simple villagers who would not harm her. For a little while, at least, she might rest and resolve on nothing. Presently she would go and get some bread and milk, and then she would nestle in the green quiet, and feel that there was a pause in her life. She turned to watch the crescent-shaped valley, that she might get back the soothing sense of peace and beauty which she had felt in her first waking.

She had not been in this attitude of contemplation more than a few minutes when across the stillness there came a piercing cry; not a brief cry, but continuous and more and more intense. Romola felt sure it was the cry of a little child in distress that no one came to help. She started up and put one foot on the side of the boat ready to leap on to the beach; but she paused there and listened: the mother of the child must be near, the cry must soon cease. But it went on, and drew Romola so irresistibly, seeming the more piteous to her for the sense of peace which had preceded it, that she jumped on to the beach and walked many paces before she

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knew what direction she would take. The cry, she thought, came from some rough garden growth many yards on her right hand, where she saw a half-ruined hovel. She climbed over a low broken stone fence, and made her way across patches of weedy green crops and ripe but neglected corn. The cry grew plainer, and convinced that she was right she hastened towards the hovel; but even in that hurried walk she felt an oppressive change in the air as she left the sea behind. Was there some taint lurking amongst the green luxuriance that had seemed such an inviting shelter from the heat of the coming day? She could see the opening into the hovel now, and the cry was darting through her like a pain. The next moment her foot was within the doorway, but the sight she beheld in the sombre light arrested her with a shock of awe and horror. On the straw, with which the floor was scattered, lay three dead bodies, one of a tall man, one of a girl about eight years old, and one of a young woman whose long black hair was being clutched and pulled by a living child—the child that was sending forth the piercing cry. Romola's experience in the haunts of death and disease made thought and action prompt: she lifted the little living child, and in trying to soothe it on her bosom, still bent to look at the bodies and see if they were really dead. The strongly marked type of race in their features, and their peculiar garb, made her conjecture that they were Spanish or Portuguese Jews, who had perhaps been put ashore and abandoned there by rapacious sailors, to whom their property remained

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as a prey. Such things were happening continually to Jews compelled to abandon their homes by the Inquisition: the cruelty of greed thrust them from the sea, and the cruelty of superstition thrust them back to it.

"But, surely," thought Romola, "I shall find some woman in the village whose mother's heart will not let her refuse to tend this helpless child—if the real mother is indeed dead."

This doubt remained, because while the man and girl looked emaciated and also showed signs of having been long dead, the woman seemed to have been hardier, and had not quite lost the robustness of her form. Romola, kneeling, was about to lay her hand on the heart; but as she lifted the piece of yellow woollen drapery that lay across the bosom, she saw the purple spots which marked the familiar pestilence. Then it struck her that if the villagers knew of this, she might have more difficulty than she had expected in getting help from them; they would perhaps shrink from her with that child in her arms. But she had money to offer them, and they would not refuse to give her some goat's milk in exchange for it.

She set out at once towards the village, her mind filled now with the effort to soothe the little dark creature, and with wondering how she should win some woman to be good to it. She could not help hoping a little in a certain awe she had observed herself to inspire, when she appeared, unknown and unexpected, in her religious dress. As she passed across a breadth of cultivated ground, she noticed,

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with wonder, that little patches of corn mingled with the other crops had been left to over-ripeness untouched by the sickle, and that golden apples and dark figs lay rotting on the weedy earth. There were grassy spaces within sight, but no cow, or sheep, or goat. The stillness began to have something fearful in it to Romola; she hurried along towards the thickest cluster of houses, where there would be the most life to appeal to on behalf of the helpless life she carried in her arms. But she had picked up two figs, and bit little pieces from the sweet pulp to still the child with.

She entered between two lines of dwellings. It was time that villagers should have been stirring long ago, but not a soul was in sight. The air was becoming more and more oppressive, laden, it seemed, with some horrible impurity. There was a door open; she looked in, and saw grim emptiness. Another open door; and through that she saw a man lying dead with all his garments on, his head lying athwart a spade handle, and an earthenware cruse in his hand, as if he had fallen suddenly.

Romola felt horror taking possession of her. Was she in a village of the unburied dead? She wanted to listen if there were any faint sound, but the child cried out afresh when she ceased to feed it, and the cry filled her ears. At last she saw a figure crawling slowly out of a house, and soon sinking back in a sitting posture against the wall. She hastened towards the figure; it was a young woman in fevered anguish, and she, too, held a pitcher in her hand. As Romola approached her she did not start; the

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one need was too absorbing for any other idea to impress itself on her.

"Water! get me water!" she said, with a moaning utterance.

Romola stooped to take the pitcher, and said gently in her ear, "You shall have water; can you point towards the well?"

The hand was lifted towards the more distant end of the little street, and Romola set off at once with as much speed as she could use under the difficulty of carrying the pitcher as well as feeding the child. But the little one was getting more content as the morsels of sweet pulp were repeated, and ceased to distress her with its cry, so that she could give a less distracted attention to the objects around her.

The well lay twenty yards or more beyond the end of the street, and as Romola was approaching it her eyes were directed to the opposite green slope immediately below the church. High up, on a patch of grass between the trees, she had descried a cow and a couple of goats, and she tried to trace a line of path that would lead her close to that cheering sight, when once she had done her errand to the well. Occupied in this way, she was not aware that she was very near the well, and that some one approaching it on the other side had fixed a pair of astonished eyes upon her.

Romola certainly presented a sight which, at that moment and in that place, could hardly have been seen without some pausing and palpitation. With her gaze fixed intently on the distant slope, the long lines of her thick grey garment giving a gliding

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character to her rapid walk, her hair rolling backward and illuminated on the left side by the sunrays, the little olive baby on her right arm now looking out with jet-black eyes, she might well startle that youth of fifteen, accustomed to swing the censer in the presence of a Madonna less fair and marvellous than this.

"She carries a pitcher in her hand—to fetch water for the sick. It is the Holy Mother, come to take care of the people who have the pestilence."

It was a sight of awe: she would, perhaps, be angry with those who fetched water for themselves only. The youth flung down his vessel in terror, and Romola, aware now of some one near her, saw the black and white figure fly as if for dear life towards the slope she had just been contemplating. But remembering the parched sufferer, she half-filled her pitcher quickly and hastened back.

Entering the house to look for a small cup, she saw salt meat and meal: there were no signs of want in the dwelling. With nimble movement she seated baby on the ground, and lifted a cup of water to the sufferer, who drank eagerly and then closed her eyes and leaned her head backward, seeming to give herself up to the sense of relief. Presently she opened her eyes, and, looking at Romola, said languidly—

"Who are you?"

"I came over the sea," said Romola. "I only came this morning. Are all the people dead in these houses?"

"I think they are all ill now—all that are not

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dead. My father and my sister lie dead up-stairs, and there is no one to bury them: and soon I shall die."

"Not so, I hope," said Romola. "I am come to take care of you. I am used to the pestilence; I am not afraid. But there must be some left who are not ill. I saw a youth running towards the mountain when I went to the well."

"I cannot tell. When the pestilence came, a great many people went away, and drove off the cows and goats. Give me more water!"

Romola, suspecting that if she followed the direction of the youth's flight, she should find some men and women who were still healthy and able, determined to seek them out at once, that she might at least win them to take care of the child, and leave her free to come back and see how many living needed help, and how many dead needed burial. She trusted to her powers of persuasion to conquer the aid of the timorous, when once she knew what was to be done.

Promising the sick woman to come back to her, she lifted the dark bantling again, and set off towards the slope. She felt no burden of choice on her now, no longing for death. She was thinking how she would go to the other sufferers, as she had gone to that fevered woman.

But, with the child on her arm, it was not so easy to her as usual to walk up a slope, and it seemed a long while before the winding path took her near the cow and the goats. She was beginning herself to feel faint from heat, hunger, and thirst, and as

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she reached a double turning, she paused to consider whether she would not wait near the cow, which some one was likely to come and milk soon, rather than toil up to the church before she had taken any rest. Raising her eyes to measure the steep distance, she saw peeping between the boughs, not more than five yards off, a broad round face, watching her attentively, and lower down the black skirt of a priest's garment, and a hand grasping a bucket. She stood mutely observing, and the face, too, remained motionless. Romola had often witnessed the overpowering force of dread in cases of pestilence, and she was cautious.

Raising her voice in a tone of gentle pleading, she said, "I came over the sea. I am hungry, and so is the child. Will you not give us some milk?"

Romola had divined part of the truth, but she had not divined that preoccupation of the priest's mind which charged her words with a strange significance. Only a little while ago, the young acolyte had brought word to the Padre that he had seen the Holy Mother with the Babe, fetching water for the sick: she was as tall as the cypresses, and had a light about her head, and she looked up at the church. The pievano[1] had not listened with entire belief: he had been more than fifty years in the world without having any vision of the Madonna, and he thought the boy might have misinterpreted the unexpected appearance of a villager. But he had been made uneasy, and before venturing to come down and milk his cow, he had repeated

[1] Parish priest.

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many Aves. The pievano's conscience tormented him a little: he trembled at the pestilence, but he also trembled at the thought of the mild-faced Mother, conscious that that Invisible Mercy might demand something more of him than prayers and "Hails." In this state of mind—unable to banish the image the boy had raised of the Mother with the glory about her tending the sick—the pievano had come down to milk his cow, and had suddenly caught sight of Romola pausing at the parted way. Her pleading words, with their strange refinement of tone and accent, instead of being explanatory, had a preternatural sound for him. Yet he did not quite believe he saw the Holy Mother: he was in a state of alarmed hesitation. If anything miraculous were happening, he felt there was no strong presumption that the miracle would be in his favour. He dared not run away; he dared not advance.

"Come down," said Romola, after a pause. "Do not fear. Fear rather to deny food to the hungry when they ask you."

A moment after, the boughs were parted, and the complete figure of a thick-set priest with a broad, harmless face, his black frock much worn and soiled, stood, bucket in hand, looking at her timidly, and still keeping aloof as he took the path towards the cow in silence.

Romola followed him and watched him without speaking again, as he seated himself against the tethered cow, and, when he had nervously drawn some milk, gave it to her in a brass cup he carried with him in the bucket. As Romola put the cup to

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the lips of the eager child, and afterwards drank some milk herself, the Padre observed her from his wooden stool with a timidity that changed its character a little. He recognised the Hebrew baby, he was certain that he had a substantial woman before him; but there was still something strange and unaccountable in Romola's presence in this spot, and the Padre had a presentiment that things were going to change with him. Moreover, that Hebrew baby was terribly associated with the dread of pestilence.

Nevertheless, when Romola smiled at the little one sucking its own milky lips, and stretched out the brass cup again, saying, "Give us more, good father," he obeyed less nervously than before.

Romola on her side was not unobservant; and when the second supply of milk had been drunk, she looked down at the round-headed man, and said with mild decision—

"And now tell me, father, how this pestilence came, and why you let your people die without the sacraments, and lie unburied. For I am come over the sea to help those who are left alive—and you, too, will help them now."

He told her the story of the pestilence: and while he was telling it, the youth, who had fled before, had come peeping and advancing gradually, till at last he stood and watched the scene from behind a neighbouring bush.

Three families of Jews, twenty souls in all, had been put ashore many weeks ago, some of them already ill of the pestilence. The villagers, said

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the priest, had of course refused to give shelter to the miscreants, otherwise than in a distant hovel, and under heaps of straw. But when the strangers had died of the plague, and some of the people had thrown the bodies into the sea, the sea had brought them back again in a great storm, and everybody was smitten with terror. A grave was dug, and the bodies were buried; but then the pestilence attacked the Christians, and the greater number of the villagers went away over the mountain, driving away their few cattle, and carrying provisions. The priest had not fled; he had stayed and prayed for the people, and he had prevailed on the youth Jacopo to stay with him; but he confessed that a mortal terror of the plague had taken hold of him, and he had not dared to go down into the valley.

"You will fear no longer, father," said Romola, in a tone of encouraging authority; "you will come down with me, and we will see who is living, and we will look for the dead to bury them. I have walked about for months where the pestilence was, and see, I am strong. Jacopo will come with us," she added, motioning to the peeping lad, who came slowly from behind his defensive bush, as if invisible threads were dragging him.

"Come, Jacopo," said Romola again, smiling at him, "you will carry the child for me. See! your arms are strong, and I am tired."

That was a dreadful proposal to Jacopo, and to the priest also; but they were both under a peculiar influence forcing them to obey. The suspicion that

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Romola was a supernatural form was dissipated, but their minds were filled instead with the more effective sense that she was a human being whom God had sent over the sea to command them.

"Now we will carry down the milk," said Romola, "and see if any one wants it."

So they went all together down the slope, and that morning the sufferers saw help come to them in their despair. There were hardly more than a score alive in the whole valley; but all of these were comforted, most were saved, and the dead were buried.

In this way days, weeks, and months passed with Romola till the men were digging and sowing again, till the women smiled at her as they carried their great vases on their heads to the well, and the Hebrew baby was a tottering tumbling Christian, Benedetto by name, having been baptised in the church on the mountain-side. But by that time she herself was suffering from the fatigue and languor that must come after a continuous strain on mind and body. She had taken for her dwelling one of the houses abandoned by their owners, standing a little aloof from the village street; and here on a thick heap of clean straw—a delicious bed for those who do not dream of down—she felt glad to lie still through most of the daylight hours, taken care of along with the little Benedetto by a woman whom the pestilence had widowed.

Every day the Padre and Jacopo and the small flock of surviving villagers paid their visit to this cottage to see the blessed Lady, and to bring her

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of their best as an offering — honey, fresh cakes, eggs, and polenta. It was a sight they could none of them forget, a sight they all told of in their old age—how the sweet and sainted lady with her fair face, her golden hair, and her brown eyes that had a blessing in them, lay weary with her labours after she had been sent over the sea to help them in their extremity, and how the queer little black Benedetto used to crawl about the straw by her side and want everything that was brought to her, and she always gave him a bit of what she took, and told them if they loved her they must be good to Benedetto.

Many legends were afterwards told in that valley about the blessed Lady who came over the sea, but they were legends by which all who heard might know that in times gone by a woman had done beautiful loving deeds there, rescuing those who were ready to perish.

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CHAPTER LXIX.

HOMEWARD.

In those silent wintry hours when Romola lay resting from her weariness, her mind, travelling back over the past, and gazing across the undefined distance of the future, saw all objects from a new position. Her experience since the moment of her waking in the boat had come to her with as strong an effect as that of the fresh seal on the dissolving wax. She had felt herself without bonds, without motive; sinking in mere egoistic complaining that life could bring her no content; feeling a right to say, "I am tired of life, I want to die." That thought had sobbed within her as she fell asleep, but from the moment after her waking when the cry had drawn her, she had not even reflected, as she used to do in Florence, that she was glad to live because she could lighten sorrow—she had simply lived, with so energetic an impulse to share the life around her, to answer the call of need and do the work which cried aloud to be done, that the reasons for living, enduring, labouring, never took the form of argument.

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The experience was like a new baptism to Romola. In Florence the simpler relations of the human being to his fellow-men had been complicated for her with all the special ties of marriage, the State, and religious discipleship, and when these had disappointed her trust, the shock seemed to have shaken her aloof from life and stunned her sympathy. But now she said, "It was mere baseness in me to desire death. If everything else is doubtful, this suffering that I can help is certain; if the glory of the cross is an illusion, the sorrow is only the truer. While the strength is in my arm I will stretch it out to the fainting; while the light visits my eyes they shall seek the forsaken."

And then the past arose with a fresh appeal to her. Her work in this green valley was done, and the emotions that were disengaged from the people immediately around her rushed back into the old deep channels of use and affection. That rare possibility of self-contemplation which comes in any complete severance from our wonted life made her judge herself as she had never done before: the compunction which is inseparable from a sympathetic nature keenly alive to the possible experience of others, began to stir in her with growing force. She questioned the justness of her own conclusions, of her own deeds: she had been rash, arrogant, always dissatisfied that others were not good enough, while she herself had not been true to what her soul had once recognised as the best. She began to condemn her flight: after all, it had been cowardly self-care; the grounds on which Savonarola had once taken her

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back were truer, deeper than the grounds she had had for her second flight. How could she feel the needs of others and not feel, above all, the needs of the nearest?

But then came reaction against such self-reproach. The memory of her life with Tito, of the conditions which made their real union impossible, while their external union imposed a set of false duties on her which were essentially the concealment and sanctioning of what her mind revolted from, told her that flight had been her only resource. All minds, except such as are delivered from doubt by dulness of sensibility, must be subject to this recurring conflict where the many-twisted conditions of life have forbidden the fulfilment of a bond. For in strictness there is no replacing of relations: the presence of the new does not nullify the failure and breach of the old. Life has lost its perfection: it has been maimed; and until the wounds are quite scarred, conscience continually casts backward, doubting glances.

Romola shrank with dread from the renewal of her proximity to Tito, and yet she was uneasy that she had put herself out of reach of knowing what was his fate—uneasy that the moment might yet come when he would be in misery and need her. There was still a thread of pain within her, testifying to those words of Fra Girolamo, that she could not cease to be a wife. Could anything utterly cease for her that had once mingled itself with the current of her heart's blood?

Florence, and all her life there, had come back to

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her like hunger; her feelings could not go wandering after the possible and the vague: their living fibre was fed with the memory of familiar things. And the thought that she had divided herself from them for ever became more and more importunate in these hours that were unfilled with action. What if Fra Girolamo had been wrong? What if the life of Florence was a web of inconsistencies? Was she, then, something higher, that she should shake the dust from off her feet, and say, "This world is not good enough for me"? If she had been really higher, she would not so easily have lost all her trust.

Her indignant grief for her godfather had no longer complete possession of her, and her sense of debt to Savonarola was recovering predominance. Nothing that had come, or was to come, could do away with the fact that there had been a great inspiration in him which had waked a new life in her. Who, in all her experience, could demand the same gratitude from her as he? His errors—might they not bring calamities?

She could not rest. She hardly knew whether it was her strength returning with the budding leaves that made her active again, or whether it was her eager longing to get nearer Florence. She did not imagine herself daring to enter Florence, but the desire to be near enough to learn what was happening there urged itself with a strength that excluded all other purposes.

And one March morning the people in the valley were gathered together to see the blessed Lady

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depart. Jacopo had fetched a mule for her, and was going with her over the mountains. The Padre, too, was going with her to the nearest town, that he might help her in learning the safest way by which she might get to Pistoja. Her store of trinkets and money, untouched in this valley, was abundant for her needs.

If Romola had been less drawn by the longing that was taking her away, it would have been a hard moment for her when she walked along the village street for the last time, while the Padre and Jacopo, with the mule, were awaiting her near the well. Her steps were hindered by the wailing people, who knelt and kissed her hands, then clung to her skirts and kissed the grey folds, crying, "Ah, why will you go, when the good season is beginning and the crops will be plentiful? Why will you go?"

"Do not be sorry," said Romola, "you are well now, and I shall remember you. I must go and see if my own people want me."

"Ah, yes, if they have the pestilence!"

"Look at us again, Madonna!"

"Yes, yes, we will be good to the little Benedetto!"

At last Romola mounted her mule, but a vigorous screaming from Benedetto as he saw her turn from him in this new position, was an excuse for all the people to follow her and insist that he must ride on the mule's neck to the foot of the slope.

The parting must come at last, but as Romola turned continually before she passed out of sight, she saw the little flock lingering to catch the last waving of her hand.

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CHAPTER LXX.

MEETING AGAIN.

On the fourteenth of April Romola was once more within the walls of Florence. Unable to rest at Pistoja, where contradictory reports reached her about the Trial by Fire, she had gone on to Prato; and was beginning to think that she should be drawn on to Florence in spite of dread, when she encountered that monk of San Spirito who had been her godfather's confessor. From him she learned the full story of Savonarola's arrest, and of her husband's death. This Augustinian monk had been in the stream of people who had followed the waggon with its awful burthen into the Piazza, and he could tell her what was generally known in Florence — that Tito had escaped from an assaulting mob by leaping into the Arno, but had been murdered on the bank by an old man who had long had an enmity against him. But Romola understood the catastrophe as no one else did. Of Savonarola the monk told her, in that tone of unfavourable prejudice which was usual in the Black Brethren (Frati Neri) towards the

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brother who showed white under his black, that he had confessed himself a deceiver of the people.

Romola paused no longer. That evening she was in Florence, sitting in agitated silence under the exclamations of joy and wailing, mingled with exuberant narrative, which were poured into her ears by Monna Brigida, who had backslided into false hair in Romola's absence, but now drew it off again and declared she would not mind being grey, if her dear child would stay with her.

Romola was too deeply moved by the main events which she had known before coming to Florence, to be wrought upon by the doubtful gossiping details added in Brigida's narrative. The tragedy of her husband's death, of Fra Girolamo's confession of duplicity under the coercion of torture, left her hardly any power of apprehending minor circumstances. All the mental activity she could exert under that load of awe-stricken grief, was absorbed by two purposes which must supersede every other; to try and see Savonarola, and to learn what had become of Tessa and the children.

"Tell me, cousin," she said abruptly, when Monna Brigida's tongue had run quite away from troubles into projects of Romola's living with her, "has anything been seen or said since Tito's death of a young woman with two little children?"

Brigida started, rounded her eyes, and lifted up her hands.

"Cristo! no. What! was he so bad as that, my poor child? Ah, then, that was why you went away, and left me word only that you went of your

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own free will. Well, well; if I'd known that, I shouldn't have thought you so strange and flighty. For I did say to myself, though I didn't tell anybody else, 'What was she to go away from her husband for, leaving him to mischief, only because they cut poor Bernardo's head off? She's got her father's temper,' I said, 'that's what it is.' Well, well; never scold me, child: Bardo *was* fierce, you can't deny it. But if you had only told me the truth, that there was a young hussey and children, I should have understood it all. Anything seen or said of her? No; and the less the better. They say enough of ill about him without that. But since that was the reason you went——"

"No, dear cousin," said Romola, interrupting her earnestly, "pray do not talk so. I wish above all things to find that young woman and her children, and to take care of them. They are quite helpless. Say nothing against it; that is the thing I shall do first of all."

"Well," said Monna Brigida, shrugging her shoulders and lowering her voice with an air of puzzled discomfiture, "if that's being a Piagnone, I've been taking peas for paternosters. Why, Fra Girolamo said as good as that widows ought not to marry again. Step in at the door and it's a sin and a shame, it seems; but come down the chimney and you're welcome. *Two* children—Santiddio!"

"Cousin, the poor thing has done no conscious wrong: she is ignorant of everything. I will tell you—but not now."

Early the next morning Romola's steps were di-

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rected to the house beyond San Ambrogio where she had once found Tessa; but it was as she had feared: Tessa was gone. Romola conjectured that Tito had sent her away beforehand to some spot where he had intended to join her, for she did not believe that he would willingly part with those children. It was a painful conjecture, because, if Tessa were out of Florence, there was hardly a chance of finding her, and Romola pictured the childish creature waiting and waiting at some wayside spot in wondering, helpless misery. Those who lived near could tell her nothing except that old deaf Lisa had gone away a week ago with her goods, but no one knew where Tessa had gone. Romola saw no further active search open to her; for she had no knowledge that could serve as a starting-point for inquiry, and not only her innate reserve but a more noble sensitiveness made her shrink from assuming an attitude of generosity in the eyes of others by publishing Tessa's relation to Tito, along with her own desire to find her. Many days passed in anxious inaction. Even under strong solicitation from other thoughts Romola found her heart palpitating if she caught sight of a pair of round brown legs, or of a short woman in the contadina dress.

She never for a moment told herself that it was heroism or exalted charity in her to seek these beings; she needed something that she was bound specially to care for; she yearned to clasp the children and to make them love her. This at least would be some sweet result, for others as well as herself, from all her past sorrow. It appeared there

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was much property of Tito's to which she had a claim; but she distrusted the cleanness of that money, and she had determined to make it all over to the State, except so much as was equal to the price of her father's library. This would be enough for the modest support of Tessa and the children. But Monna Brigida threw such planning into the background by clamorously insisting that Romola must live with her and never forsake her till she had seen her safe in Paradise — else why had she persuaded her to turn Piagnone? — and if Romola wanted to rear other people's children, she, Monna Brigida, must rear them too. Only they must be found first.

Romola felt the full force of that innuendo. But strong feeling unsatisfied is never without its superstition, either of hope or despair. Romola's was the superstition of hope: *somehow* she was to find that mother and the children. And at last another direction for active inquiry suggested itself. She learned that Tito had provided horses and mules to await him in San Gallo; he was therefore going to leave Florence by the gate of San Gallo, and she determined, though without much confidence in the issue, to try and ascertain from the gatekeepers if they had observed any one corresponding to the description of Tessa, with her children, to have passed the gates before the morning of the ninth of April. Walking along the Via San Gallo, and looking watchfully about her through her long widow's veil, lest she should miss any object that might aid her, she descried Bratti chaffering with a customer. That

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roaming man, she thought, might aid her: she would not mind talking of Tessa to *him*. But as she put aside her veil and crossed the street towards him, she saw something hanging from the corner of his basket which made her heart leap with a much stronger hope.

"Bratti, my friend," she said abruptly, "where did you get that necklace?"

"Your servant, madonna," said Bratti, looking round at her very deliberately, his mind not being subject to surprise. "It's a necklace worth money, but I shall get little by it, for my heart's too tender for a trader's; I have promised to keep it in pledge."

"Pray tell me where you got it;—from a little woman named Tessa, is it not true?"

"Ah! if you know her," said Bratti, "and would redeem it of me at a small profit, and give it her again, you'd be doing a charity, for she cried at parting with it—you'd have thought she was running into a brook. It's a small profit I'll charge you. You shall have it for a florin, for I don't like to be hard-hearted."

"Where is she?" said Romola, giving him the money, and unclasping the necklace from the basket in joyful agitation.

"Outside the gate there, at the other end of the Borgo, at old Sibilla Manetti's: anybody will tell you which is the house."

Romola went along with winged feet, blessing that incident of the Carnival which had made her learn by heart the appearance of this necklace. Soon she was at the house she sought. The young woman

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and the children were in the inner room—were to have been fetched away a fortnight ago and more —had no money, only their clothes, to pay a poor widow with for their food and lodging. But since madonna knew them——Romola waited to hear no more, but opened the door.

Tessa was seated on the low bed: her crying had passed into tearless sobs, and she was looking with sad blank eyes at the two children, who were playing in an opposite corner—Lillo covering his head with his skirt and roaring at Ninna to frighten her, then peeping out again to see how she bore it. The door was a little behind Tessa, and she did not turn round when it opened, thinking it was only the old woman: expectation was no longer alive. Romola had thrown aside her veil and paused a moment, holding the necklace in sight. Then she said, in that pure voice that used to cheer her father—

"Tessa!"

Tessa started to her feet and looked round.

"See," said Romola, clasping the beads on Tessa's neck, "God has sent me to you again."

The poor thing screamed and sobbed, and clung to the arms that fastened the necklace. She could not speak. The two children came from their corner, laid hold of their mother's skirts, and looked up with wide eyes at Romola.

That day they all went home to Monna Brigida's, in the Borgo degli Albizzi. Romola had made known to Tessa by gentle degrees, that Naldo could never come to her again: not because he was cruel, but because he was dead.

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"But be comforted, my Tessa," said Romola. "I am come to take care of you always. And we have got Lillo and Ninna."

Monna Brigida's mouth twitched in the struggle between her awe of Romola and the desire to speak unseasonably.

"Let be, for the present," she thought; "but it seems to me a thousand years till I tell this little contadina, who seems not to know how many fingers she's got on her hand, who Romola is. And I *will* tell her some day, else she'll never know her place. It's all very well for Romola;—nobody will call their souls their own when she's by; but if I'm to have this puss-faced minx living in my house she must be humble to me."

However, Monna Brigida wanted to give the children too many sweets for their supper, and confessed to Romola, the last thing before going to bed, that it would be a shame not to take care of such cherubs.

"But you must give up to me a little, Romola, about their eating, and those things. For you have never had a baby, and I had twins, only they died as soon as they were born."

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CHAPTER LXXI.

THE CONFESSION.

When Romola brought home Tessa and the children, April was already near its close, and the other great anxiety on her mind had been wrought to its highest pitch by the publication in print of Fra Girolamo's Trial, or rather of the confessions drawn from him by the sixteen Florentine citizens commissioned to interrogate him. The appearance of this document, issued by order of the Signoria, had called forth such strong expressions of public suspicion and discontent, that severe measures were immediately taken for recalling it. Of course there were copies accidentally mislaid, and a second edition, *not* by order of the Signoria, was soon in the hands of eager readers.

Romola, who began to despair of ever speaking with Fra Girolamo, read this evidence again and again, desiring to judge it by some clearer light than the contradictory impressions that were taking the form of assertions in the mouths of both partisans and enemies.

In the more devout followers of Savonarola his

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want of constancy under torture, and his retractation of prophetic claims, had produced a consternation too profound to be at once displaced as it ultimately was by the suspicion, which soon grew into a positive datum, that any reported words of his which were in inexplicable contradiction to their faith in him, had not come from the lips of the prophet, but from the falsifying pen of Ser Ceccone, that notary of evil repute, who had made the digest of the examination. But there were obvious facts that at once threw discredit on the printed document. Was not the list of sixteen examiners half made up of the prophet's bitterest enemies? Was not the notorious Dolfo Spini one of the new Eight prematurely elected, in order to load the dice against a man whose ruin had been determined on by the party in power? It was but a murder with slow formalities that was being transacted in the Old Palace. The Signoria had resolved to drive a good bargain with the Pope and the Duke of Milan, by extinguishing the man who was as great a molestation to vicious citizens and greedy foreign tyrants as to a corrupt clergy. The Frate had been doomed beforehand, and the only question that was pretended to exist now was, whether the Republic, in return for a permission to lay a tax on ecclesiastical property, should deliver him alive into the hands of the Pope, or whether the Pope should further concede to the Republic what its dignity demanded—the privilege of hanging and burning its own prophet on its own piazza.

Who, under such circumstances, would give full credit to this so-called confession? If the Frate had

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denied his prophetic gift, the denial had only been wrenched from him by the agony of torture—agony that, in his sensitive frame, must quickly produce raving. What if these wicked examiners declared that he had only had the torture of the rope and pulley thrice, and only on one day, and that his confessions had been made when he was under no bodily coercion—was that to be believed? He had been tortured much more; he had been tortured in proportion to the distress his confessions had created in the hearts of those who loved him.

Other friends of Savonarola, who were less ardent partisans, did not doubt the substantial genuineness of the confession, however it might have been coloured by the transpositions and additions of the notary; but they argued indignantly that there was nothing which could warrant a condemnation to death, or even to grave punishment. It must be clear to all impartial men that if this examination represented the only evidence against the Frate, he would die, not for any crime, but because he had made himself inconvenient to the Pope, to the rapacious Italian States that wanted to dismember their Tuscan neighbour, and to those unworthy citizens who sought to gratify their private ambition in opposition to the common weal.

Not a shadow of political crime had been proved against him. Not one stain had been detected on his private conduct: his fellow-monks, including one who had formerly been his secretary for several years, and who, with more than the average culture of his companions, had a disposition to criticise Fra

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Girolamo's rule as Prior, bore testimony, even after the shock of his retractation, to an unimpeachable purity and consistency in his life, which had commanded their unsuspecting veneration. The Pope himself had not been able to raise a charge of heresy against the Frate, except on the ground of disobedience to a mandate, and disregard of the sentence of excommunication. It was difficult to justify that breach of discipline by argument, but there was a moral insurgence in the minds of grave men against the Court of Rome, which tended to confound the theoretic distinction between the Church and churchmen, and to lighten the scandal of disobedience.

Men of ordinary morality and public spirit felt that the triumph of the Frate's enemies was really the triumph of gross licence. And keen Florentines like Soderini and Piero Guicciardini may well have had an angry smile on their lips at a severity which dispensed with all law in order to hang and burn a man in whom the seductions of a public career had warped the strictness of his veracity; may well have remarked that if the Frate had mixed a much deeper fraud with a zeal and ability less inconvenient to high personages, the fraud would have been regarded as an excellent oil for ecclesiastical and political wheels.

Nevertheless such shrewd men were forced to admit that, however poor a figure the Florentine government made in its clumsy pretence of a judicial warrant for what had in fact been predetermined as an act of policy, the measures of the Pope against Savonarola were necessary measures of self-defence.

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Not to try and rid himself of a man who wanted to stir up the Powers of Europe to summon a General Council and depose him, would have been adding ineptitude to iniquity. There was no denying that towards Alexander the Sixth Savonarola was a rebel, and, what was much more, a dangerous rebel. Florence had heard him say, and had well understood what he meant, that he would not *obey the devil.* It was inevitably a life and death struggle between the Frate and the Pope; but it was less inevitable that Florence should make itself the Pope's executioner.

Romola's ears were filled in this way with the suggestions of a faith still ardent under its wounds, and the suggestions of worldly discernment, judging things according to a very moderate standard of what is possible to human nature. She could be satisfied with neither. She brought to her long meditations over that printed document many painful observations, registered more or less consciously through the years of her discipleship, which whispered a presentiment that Savonarola's retractation of his prophetic claims was not merely a spasmodic effort to escape from torture. But, on the other hand, her soul cried out for some explanation of his lapses which would make it still possible for her to believe that the main striving of his life had been pure and grand. The recent memory of the selfish discontent which had come over her like a blighting wind along with the loss of her trust in the man who had been for her an incarnation of the highest motives, had produced a reaction which is known to many as a sort of faith that has sprung up

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to them out of the very depths of their despair. It was impossible, she said now, that the negative disbelieving thoughts which had made her soul arid of all good, could be founded in the truth of things: impossible that it had not been a living spirit, and no hollow pretence, which had once breathed in the Frate's words, and kindled a new life in her. Whatever falsehood there had been in him, had been a fall and not a purpose; a gradual entanglement in which he struggled, not a contrivance encouraged by success.

Looking at the printed confessions, she saw many sentences which bore the stamp of bungling fabrication: they had that emphasis and repetition in self-accusation which none but very low hypocrites use to their fellow-men. But the fact that these sentences were in striking opposition, not only to the character of Savonarola, but also to the general tone of the confessions, strengthened the impression that the rest of the text represented in the main what had really fallen from his lips. Hardly a word was dishonourable to him except what turned on his prophetic annunciations. . He was unvarying in his statement of the ends he had pursued for Florence, the Church, and the world; and, apart from the mixture of falsity in that claim to special inspiration by which he sought to gain hold of men's minds, there was no admission of having used unworthy means. Even in this confession, and without expurgation of the notary's malign phrases, Fra Girolamo shone forth as a man who had sought his own glory indeed, but sought it by labouring for the

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very highest end—the moral welfare of men—not by vague exhortations, but by striving to turn beliefs into energies that would work in all the details of life.

"Everything that I have done," said one memorable passage, which may perhaps have had its erasures and interpolations, "I have done with the design of being for ever famous in the present and in future ages; and that I might win credit in Florence; and that nothing of great import should be done without my sanction. And when I had thus established my position in Florence, I had it in my mind to do great things in Italy and beyond Italy, by means of those chief personages with whom I had contracted friendship and consulted on high matters, such as this of the General Council. And in proportion as my first efforts succeeded, I should have adopted further measures. Above all, when the General Council had once been brought about, I intended to rouse the princes of Christendom, and especially those beyond the borders of Italy, to subdue the infidels. It was not much in my thoughts to get myself made a Cardinal or Pope, for when I should have achieved the work I had in view, I should, without being Pope, have been the first man in the world in the authority I should have possessed, and the reverence that would have been paid me. If I had been made Pope, I would not have refused the office: but it seemed to me that to be the head of that work was a greater thing than to be Pope, because a man without virtue may be Pope; but *such a work as I contemplated demanded a man of excellent virtues.*"

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That blending of ambition with belief in the supremacy of goodness made no new tone to Romola, who had been used to hear it in the voice that rang through the Duomo. It was the habit of Savonarola's mind to conceive great things, and to feel that he was the man to do them. Iniquity should be brought low; the cause of justice, purity, and love should triumph; and it should triumph by his voice, by his work, by his blood. In moments of ecstatic contemplation, doubtless, the sense of self melted in the sense of the Unspeakable, and in that part of his experience lay the elements of genuine self-abasement; but in the presence of his fellow-men for whom he was to act, pre-eminence seemed a necessary condition of his life.

And perhaps this confession, even when it described a doubleness that was conscious and deliberate, really implied no more than that wavering of belief concerning his own impressions and motives which most human beings who have not a stupid inflexibility of self-confidence must be liable to under a marked change of external conditions. In a life where the experience was so tumultuously mixed as it must have been in the Frate's, what a possibility was opened for a change of self-judgment, when, instead of eyes that venerated and knees that knelt, instead of a great work on its way to accomplishment, and in its prosperity stamping the agent as a chosen instrument, there came the hooting and the spitting and the curses of the crowd; and then the hard faces of enemies made judges; and then the horrible torture, and with the torture the irrepressible cry,

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"It is true, what you would have me say: let me go: do not torture me again: yes, yes, I am guilty. O God! Thy stroke has reached me!"

As Romola thought of the anguish that must have followed the confession—whether, in the subsequent solitude of the prison, conscience retracted or confirmed the self-taxing words—that anguish seemed to be pressing on her own heart and urging the slow bitter tears. Every vulgar self-ignorant person in Florence was glibly pronouncing on this man's demerits, while *he* was knowing a depth of sorrow which can only be known to the soul that has loved and sought the most perfect thing, and beholds itself fallen.

She had not then seen—what she saw afterwards—the evidence of the Frate's mental state after he had had thus to lay his mouth in the dust. As the days went by, the reports of new unpublished examinations, eliciting no change of confessions, ceased; Savonarola was left alone in his prison and allowed pen and ink for a while, that, if he liked, he might use his poor bruised and strained right arm to write with. He wrote; but what he wrote was no vindication of his innocence, no protest against the proceedings used towards him: it was a continued colloquy with that divine purity with which he sought complete reunion; it was the outpouring of self-abasement; it was one long cry for inward renovation. No lingering echoes of the old vehement self-assertion, "Look at my work, for it is good, and those who set their faces against it are the children of the devil!" The voice of Sadness tells him,

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"God placed thee in the midst of the people even as if thou hadst been one of the excellent. In this way thou hast taught others, and hast failed to learn thyself. Thou hast cured others: and thou thyself hast been still diseased. Thy heart was lifted up at the beauty of thy own deeds, and through this thou hast lost thy wisdom and art become, and shalt be to all eternity, nothing. . . . After so many benefits with which God has honoured thee, thou art fallen into the depths of the sea; and after so many gifts bestowed on thee, thou, by thy pride and vainglory, hast scandalised all the world." And when Hope speaks and argues that the divine love has not forsaken him, it says nothing now of a great work to be done, but only says, "Thou art not forsaken, else why is thy heart bowed in penitence? That too is a gift."

There is no jot of worthy evidence that from the time of his imprisonment to the supreme moment, Savonarola thought or spoke of himself as a martyr. The idea of martyrdom had been to him a passion dividing the dream of the future with the triumph of beholding his work achieved. And now, in place of both, had come a resignation which he called by no glorifying name.

But therefore he may the more fitly be called a martyr by his fellow-men to all time. For power rose against him not because of his sins, but because of his greatness—not because he sought to deceive the world, but because he sought to make it noble. And through that greatness of his he endured a

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double agony: not only the reviling, and the torture, and the death-throe, but the agony of sinking from the vision of glorious achievement into that deep shadow where he could only say, "I count as nothing: darkness encompasses me: yet the light I saw was the true light."

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CHAPTER LXXII.

THE LAST SILENCE.

Romola had seemed to hear, as if they had been a cry, the words repeated to her by many lips—the words uttered by Savonarola when he took leave of those brethren of San Marco who had come to witness his signature of the confession: "Pray for me, for God has withdrawn from me the spirit of prophecy."

Those words had shaken her with new doubts as to the mode in which he looked back at the past in moments of complete self-possession. And the doubts were strengthened by more piteous things still, which soon reached her ears.

The nineteenth of May had come, and by that day's sunshine there had entered into Florence the two Papal Commissaries, charged with the completion of Savonarola's trial. They entered amid the acclamations of the people, calling for the death of the Frate. For now the popular cry was, "It is the Frate's deception that has brought on all our misfortunes; let him be burned, and all things right will be done, and our evils will cease."

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The next day it is well certified that there was fresh and fresh torture of the shattered sensitive frame; and now, at the first sight of the horrible implements, Savonarola, in convulsed agitation, fell on his knees, and in brief passionate words *retracted his confession*, declared that he had spoken falsely in denying his prophetic gift, and that if he suffered, he would suffer for the truth—"The things that I have spoken, I had them from God."

But not the less the torture was laid upon him, and when he was under it he was asked why he had uttered those retracting words. Men were not demons in those days, and yet nothing but confessions of guilt were held a reason for release from torture. The answer came: "I said it that I might seem good; tear me no more, I will tell you the truth."

There were Florentine assessors at this new trial, and those words of twofold retractation had soon spread. They filled Romola with dismayed uncertainty.

"But"—it flashed across her—"there will come a moment when he may speak. When there is no dread hanging over him but the dread of falsehood, when they have brought him into the presence of death, when he is lifted above the people, and looks on them for the last time, they cannot hinder him from speaking a last decisive word. I will be there."

Three days after, on the 23d of May 1498, there was again a long narrow platform stretching across the great piazza, from the Palazzo Vecchio towards the Tetta de' Pisani. But there was no grove of fuel

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as before: instead of that, there was one great heap of fuel placed on the circular area which made the termination of the long narrow platform. And above this heap of fuel rose a gibbet with three halters on it; a gibbet which, having two arms, still looked so much like a cross as to make some beholders uncomfortable, though one arm had been truncated to avoid the resemblance.

On the marble terrace of the Palazzo were three tribunals; one near the door for the Bishop, who was to perform the ceremony of degradation on Fra Girolamo and the two brethren who were to suffer as his followers and accomplices; another for the Papal Commissaries, who were to pronounce them heretics and schismatics, and deliver them over to the secular arm; and a third, close to Marzocco, at the corner of the terrace where the platform began, for the Gonfaloniere, and the Eight who were to pronounce the sentence of death.

Again the Piazza was thronged with expectant faces: again there was to be a great fire kindled. In the majority of the crowd that pressed around the gibbet the expectation was that of ferocious hatred, or of mere hard curiosity to behold a barbarous sight. But there were still many spectators on the wide pavement, on the roofs, and at the windows, who, in the midst of their bitter grief and their own endurance of insult as hypocritical Piagnoni, were not without a lingering hope, even at this eleventh hour, that God would interpose, by some sign, to manifest their beloved prophet as His servant. And there were yet more who looked forward with trembling

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eagerness, as Romola did, to that final moment when Savonarola might say, "O people, I was innocent of deceit."

Romola was at a window on the north side of the Piazza, far away from the marble terrace where the tribunals stood; and near her, also looking on in painful doubt concerning the man who had won his early reverence, was a young Florentine of two-and-twenty, named Jacopo Nardi, afterwards to deserve honour as one of the very few who, feeling Fra Girolamo's eminence, have written about him with the simple desire to be veracious. He had said to Romola, with respectful gentleness, when he saw the struggle in her between her shuddering horror of the scene and her yearning to witness what might happen in the last moment—

"Madonna, there is no need for you to look at these cruel things. I will tell you when he comes out of the Palazzo. Trust to me; I know what you would see."

Romola covered her face, but the hootings that seemed to make the hideous scene still visible could not be shut out. At last her arm was touched, and she heard the words, "He comes." She looked towards the Palace, and could see Savonarola led out in his Dominican garb; could see him standing before the Bishop, and being stripped of the black mantle, the white scapulary and long white tunic, till he stood in a close woollen under-tunic, that told of no sacred office, no rank. He had been degraded, and cut off from the Church Militant.

The baser part of the multitude delight in degrada-

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tions, apart from any hatred; it is the satire they best understand. There was a fresh hoot of triumph as the three degraded brethren passed on to the tribunal of the Papal Commissaries, who were to pronounce them schismatics and heretics. Did not the prophet look like a schismatic and heretic now? It is easy to believe in the damnable state of a man who stands stripped and degraded.

Then the third tribunal was passed—that of the Florentine officials who were to pronounce sentence, and amongst whom, even at her distance, Romola could discern the odious figure of Dolfo Spini, indued in the grave black lucco, as one of the Eight.

Then the three figures, in their close white raiment, trod their way along the platform, amidst yells and grating tones of insult.

"Cover your eyes, Madonna," said Jacopo Nardi; "Fra Girolamo will be the last."

It was not long before she had to uncover them again. Savonarola was there. He was not far off her now. He had mounted the steps; she could see him look round on the multitude.

But in the same moment expectation died, and she only saw what he was seeing—torches waving to kindle the fuel beneath his dead body, faces glaring with a yet worse light; she only heard what *he* was hearing — gross jests, taunts, and curses.

The moment was past. Her face was covered again, and she only knew that Savonarola's voice had passed into eternal silence.

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EPILOGUE.

On the evening of the 22d of May 1509, five persons, of whose history we have known something, were seated in a handsome upper room opening on to a loggia which, at its right-hand corner, looked all along the Borgo Pinti, and over the city gate towards Fiesole, and the solemn heights beyond it.

At one end of the room was an archway opening into a narrow inner room, hardly more than a recess, where the light fell from above on a small altar covered with fair white linen. Over the altar was a picture, discernible at the distance where the little party sat only as the small full-length portrait of a Dominican Brother. For it was shaded from the light above by overhanging branches and wreaths of flowers, and the fresh tapers below it were unlit. But it seemed that the decoration of the altar and its recess was not complete. For part of the floor was strewn with a confusion of flowers and green boughs, and among them sat a delicate blue-eyed girl of thirteen, tossing her long light-brown hair out of her eyes, as she made selections for the wreaths she was weav-

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ing, or looked up at her mother's work in the same kind, and told her how to do it with a little air of instruction.

For that mother was not very clever at weaving flowers or at any other work. Tessa's fingers had not become more adroit with the years—only very much fatter. She got on slowly and turned her head about a good deal, and asked Ninna's opinion with much deference; for Tessa never ceased to be astonished at the wisdom of her children. She still wore her contadina gown: it was only broader than the old one; and there was the silver pin in her rough curly brown hair, and round her neck the memorable necklace, with a red cord under it, that ended mysteriously in her bosom. Her rounded face wore even a more perfect look of childish content than in her younger days: everybody was so good in the world, Tessa thought; even Monna Brigida never found fault with her now, and did little else than sleep, which was an amiable practice in everybody, and one that Tessa liked for herself.

Monna Brigida was asleep at this moment, in a straight-backed arm-chair, a couple of yards off. Her hair, parting backward under her black hood, had that soft whiteness which is not like snow or anything else, but is simply the lovely whiteness of aged hair. Her chin had sunk on her bosom, and her hands rested on the elbow of her chair. She had not been weaving flowers or doing anything else: she had only been looking on as usual, and as usual had fallen asleep.

The other two figures were seated farther off, at

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the wide doorway that opened on to the loggia. Lillo sat on the ground with his back against the angle of the door-post, and his long legs stretched out, while he held a large book open on his knee, and occasionally made a dash with his hand at an inquisitive fly, with an air of interest stronger than that excited by the finely-printed copy of Petrarch which he kept open at one place, as if he were learning something by heart.

Romola sat nearly opposite Lillo, but she was not observing him. Her hands were crossed on her lap and her eyes were fixed absently on the distant mountains: she was evidently unconscious of anything around her. An eager life had left its marks upon her: the finely-moulded cheek had sunk a little, the golden crown was less massive; but there was a placidity in Romola's face which had never belonged to it in youth. It is but once that we can know our worst sorrows, and Romola had known them while life was new.

Absorbed in this way, she was not at first aware that Lillo had ceased to look at his book, and was watching her with a slightly impatient air, which meant that he wanted to talk to her, but was not quite sure whether she would like that entertainment just now. But persevering looks make themselves felt at last. Romola did presently turn away her eyes from the distance and met Lillo's impatient dark gaze with a brighter and brighter smile. He shuffled along the floor, still keeping the book on his lap, till he got close to her and lodged his chin on her knee.

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"What is it, Lillo?" said Romola, pulling his hair back from his brow. Lillo was a handsome lad, but his features were turning out to be more massive and less regular than his father's. The blood of the Tuscan peasant was in his veins.

"Mamma Romola, what am I to be?" he said, well contented that there was a prospect of talking till it would be too late to con "Spirto gentil" any longer.

"What should you like to be, Lillo? You might be a scholar. My father was a scholar, you know, and taught me a great deal. That is the reason why I can teach you."

"Yes," said Lillo, rather hesitatingly. "But he is old and blind in the picture. Did he get a great deal of glory?"

"Not much, Lillo. The world was not always very kind to him, and he saw meaner men than himself put into higher places, because they could flatter and say what was false. And then his dear son thought it right to leave him and become a monk; and after that, my father, being blind and lonely, felt unable to do the things that would have made his learning of greater use to men, so that he might still have lived in his works after he was in his grave."

"I should not like that sort of life," said Lillo. "I should like to be something that would make me a great man, and very happy besides—something that would not hinder me from having a good deal of pleasure."

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"That is not easy, my Lillo. It is only a poor sort of happiness that could ever come by caring very much about our own narrow pleasures. We can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see it is good. There are so many things wrong and difficult in the world, that no man can be great—he can hardly keep himself from wickedness — unless he gives up thinking much about pleasure or rewards, and gets strength to endure what is hard and painful. My father had the greatness that belongs to integrity; he chose poverty and obscurity rather than falsehood. And there was Fra Girolamo — you know why I keep to-morrow sacred: *he* had the greatness which belongs to a life spent in struggling against powerful wrong, and in trying to raise men to the highest deeds they are capable of. And so, my Lillo, if you mean to act nobly and seek to know the best things God has put within reach of men, you must learn to fix your mind on that end, and not on what will happen to you because of it. And remember, if you were to choose something lower, and make it the rule of your life to seek your own pleasure and escape from what is disagreeable, calamity might come just the same; and it would be calamity falling on a base mind, which is the one

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form of sorrow that has no balm in it, and that may well make a man say,—'It would have been better for me if I had never been born.' I will tell you something, Lillo."

Romola paused for a moment. She had taken Lillo's cheeks between her hands, and his young eyes were meeting hers.

"There was a man to whom I was very near, so that I could see a great deal of his life, who made almost every one fond of him, for he was young, and clever, and beautiful, and his manners to all were gentle and kind. I believe, when I first knew him, he never thought of anything cruel or base. But because he tried to slip away from everything that was unpleasant, and cared for nothing else so much as his own safety, he came at last to commit some of the basest deeds—such as make men infamous. He denied his father, and left him to misery; he betrayed every trust that was reposed in him, that he might keep himself safe and get rich and prosperous. Yet calamity overtook him."

Again Romola paused. Her voice was unsteady, and Lillo was looking up at her with awed wonder.

"Another time, my Lillo—I will tell you another time. See, there are our old Piero di Cosimo and Nello coming up the Borgo Pinti, bringing us their flowers. Let us go and wave our hands to them, that they may know we see them."

"How queer old Piero is!" said Lillo, as they stood at the corner of the loggia, watching the ad-

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vancing figures. "He abuses you for dressing the altar, and thinking so much of Fra Girolamo, and yet he brings you the flowers."

"Never mind," said Romola. "There are many good people who did not love Fra Girolamo. Perhaps I should never have learned to love him if he had not helped me when I was in great need."

THE END.

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